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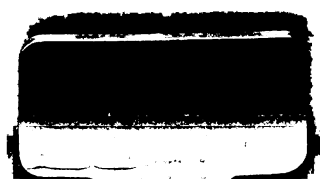
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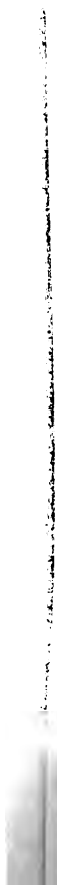
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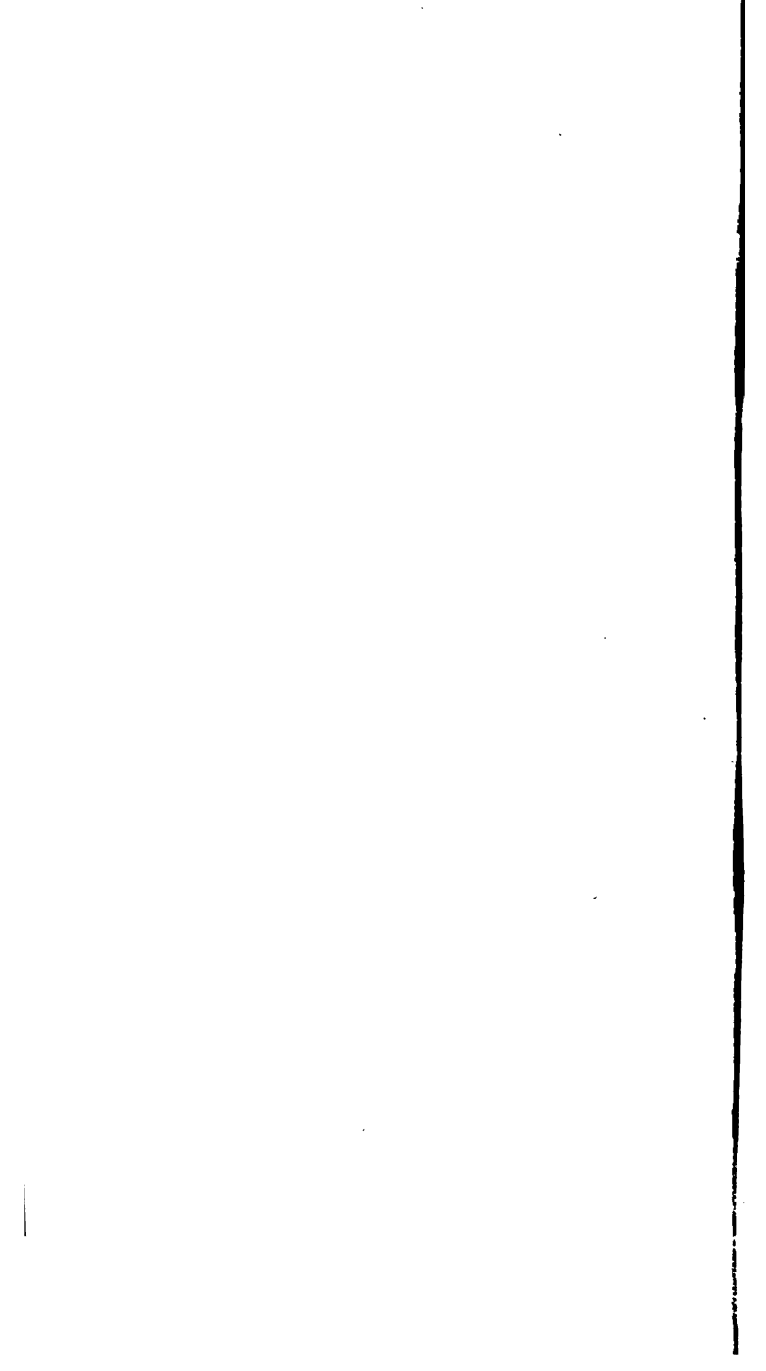
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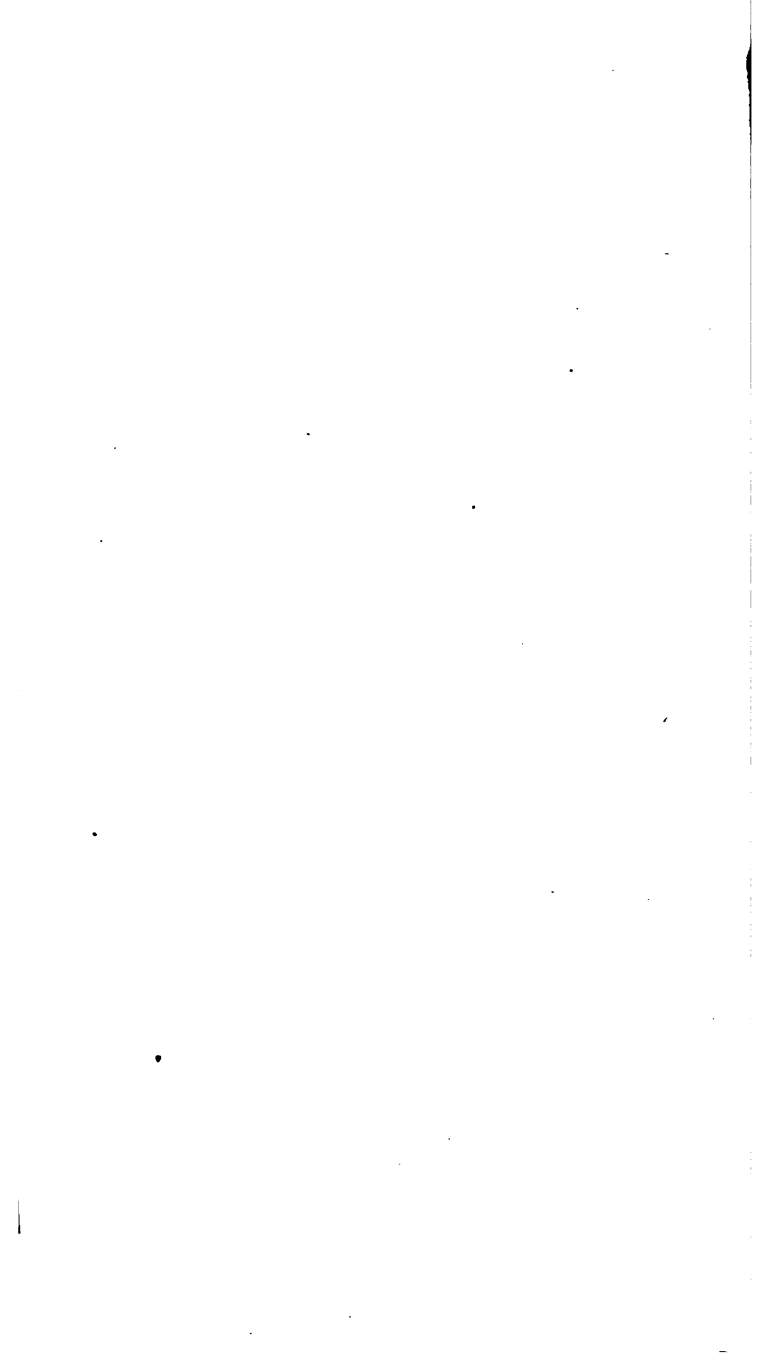
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LE SELVE

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**The Honour of the Flag and other
Stories.** By W. CLARK RUSSELL.

Le Selve

BY

OUIDA

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Le Selve.

I.

IT was a cold black night, with neither moon or stars, and an old peasant lay dying. He was all alone. No one thought it worth while to waste time beside him. He was eighty-three years old, and, according to his sons, ought to have been dead long before this autumn.

They and their families sat round a fire of logs and chips, and talked amongst themselves; not of him, he was no more of any account. On the morrow, or at farthest the day after, he would be carried to the ditch in the burial-ground at the nearest village and tumbled into it;

and so—*Addio per sempre*. It would be trouble enough to take him there; the graveyard was fifteen miles and more away.

The big room, which was kitchen, eating-place, and cellar in one, was reeking with filth; cobwebs years old hung black and gray from the rafters; the floor of beaten earth was deep with the dust and mud brought by scores of dirty feet; the smoke from the yawning chimney hung in dark mist about the walls. Upstairs there was no fire. Why waste good fuel in warming cold limbs, cold from age and death?

“I am cold, I am cold!” muttered the old man; but no one heeded. Of course he was cold; people who were dying always were so. He shivered and shook under his cotton coverlet; and it was dark, so dark, they had left him no light; light burns oil, and what could he see or hope to see? His eyes were already glazing.

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"Lazzaro got a whole crown for those turkeys which died of the pip," said his elder son in the kitchen below, stretching his hands towards the blaze. Lazzaro was a neighbour who dwelt on a clearing, and made cask-hoops and wooden shoes.

"Some folks have luck," said his son's wife as she gave her left breast to her youngest child who stood at her knee. Then they were silent, and the man cracked a nut with his teeth. The wood crackled, the child sucked, some big boys gambled with plum-stones for counters on the dirty bricks, a girl of twelve years old caught a cricket amongst the ashes, and pulled it in a leisurely way to pieces; two smaller children, twins, watching enviously and with deep interest.

"The northern birds went overhead at noon," said the younger brother Lucio after a time.

"Damn them! they fly too high to be shot," said the elder, Alcide.

"They were all in a black three-sided mass," said the younger.

"They always fly like that," said the elder. "They're a shrewd lot, those big birds."

"How they keep time! 'tis amazing," said Lucio. "Come regular with the first frost and go regular when the catkins peer out on the willows."

Then silence fell again between them.

The fire burnt more silently and more hotly; the woman put her child away from her, and thrust her breast back behind the iron busk of her stays; the twins fell asleep leaning against each other. The boys gambling with the plum-stones swore and struck at each other. From between the rafters overhead the sound of a low groan was heard now and then, and the elder son muttered, with many an oath, "Can't ye be quiet, old one?"

Time went on. They had no watch

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or clock, but they could tell that an hour had passed by the look of the burning wood. There was a louder sound as of lamentation from the room above. Alcide got up and went to the foot of the wooden stair.

"Hold your jaw, old one!" he shouted. "Can't you die in a quiet way? You've lived a deal too long as it is."

One small boy nudged his twin brother. "Grandfather's dying," he whispered with glee, and the two little creatures chuckled together. There would be one mouth the less for the polenta, one throat the less for the rare thin wine; the tic-tac of his stick on the stones would no longer come after them when they were truant, the stroke of his crutch would no longer make their shoulder-blades tingle when he caught them stealing, the sound of his voice on the stairs would no longer wake them up out of warm slumber amongst the straw

and lumber on black winter mornings when the cows were lowing to be milked.

Grandfather had been so long to be feared, it was delightful to them to hear him soundly rated, now that he could not get up and come down with his ash-stick raised.

"Grandfather's dying," they said to each other for the twentieth time with glee, as the ruddy lights from the blazing billets shone on their little unwashed brown faces.

"'Tis time we ate something," said the woman, and she unhooked the pot hanging on a chain over the fire, and poured the contents out into an earthenware bowl. It was bean-soup, strongly flavoured with lentils and fennel; it was turned into pewter plates and supped up noisily with wooden spoons; pieces of black bread were wrenched off a loaf and eaten with it. They fed as ravenously as pigs, and with less

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cleanliness. Just as they finished a sound of knocking was heard at the door of the house, which was bolted and barred.

"Who's there?" shouted Alcide.

"It is I," answered a voice with a foreign accent.

"'Tis the new steward, perdition seize him!" said Alcide, and he strode across the bricks and drew back the bolts. "What's amiss that you honour us at this time of night, sir?" he said sullenly to the person who stood on the step holding a horse's bridle.

"There is much amiss here, they say," replied the new-comer. "Is it true that your father, Adamo, is dying?"

"What's that to anyone?" said Alcide, unwillingly. "Folk usually die when they get nigh ninety."

The tone was half jocose, half sullen. The visitor in silence led his horse over the step into the entrance, hung the bridle on a nail in the

wall, closed the door and said to Alcide :

“ Take me to him.”

He was a fair man, tall, slender and young.

All the family gathered near to stare at him.

“ There is nothing to see, sir,” muttered Alcide. “ He’s as good as dead.”

“ What doctor have you ? ”

“ There is no such thing in these parts for forty miles or more.”

“ Do you mean the Commune has no medical aid ? ”

“ Safe and sure, it hasn’t.”

“ Take me to him ; I know something of medicine.”

They were all silent, vaguely frightened and ashamed. The woman nudged Alcide.

“ Best take the gentleman upstairs to poor Nonno, though he’s past all help.”

And she forced a little water into her eyes and gave a little sob.

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Alcide took the one light off the table and tramped up the steep rotten stair.

"What a piece of work about a dead greybeard!" he muttered. "When they're past labour they're best gone. You don't leave a sere tree standing to cumber the ground."

He pushed open a rickety, worm-eaten door, and the feeble oil wick shed a dim flickering light on the miserable room, where all was silence. The steward took the lamp from him, and went up to the bed of sacking and dry leaves, of which the odours were foul as a dung-heap. On it lay a gaunt old man's lifeless body. The old tree was down; it cumbered the soil no more.

The steward examined the body. It was still warm, but life was extinct; the jaw had dropped; one clenched lean hand was knotted in the white beard.

"You have let him die alone!"

said the young man with indignation and horror.

Alcide grinned, showing his strong white teeth.

"Dying's the only thing nobody grudges our doing," he said with unabashed indifference. "What would you, sir? We work all day. We can't wait on sick souls all night."

"May the measure you have served to your father be served to you by your sons!"

"Thank you, sir. Thank you kindly," answered Alcide, which is the peasant's synonym for "I will pay you out for that before long."

"It is frightful! Incredible!" murmured the young man. "You knew he was dying, and you left him alone, without even a drop of water by his side!"

"He had his coffin to keep him company," said Alcide, with a gruesome grin. "Some have to go naked into the earth."

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He pointed to a corner in which a box, roughly made from unplanned planks, was leaning against the wall.

"Hush!" said the steward with authority. "Have you no sense of shame?—no feeling?—no remorse?"

"I have done nothing wrong, sir," said Alcide sullenly. "I didn't kill him. Old age killed him."

"And neglect!"

Alcide shrugged his shoulders. Whether you hindered or hastened the death of a man so aged and so useless could not matter much, he thought; the deceased was eighty-three years of age, and had long been a burden to everybody.

"It's more than ten years that he's not done a stroke of work," he replied sullenly, "and yet he expected his share in the polenta and the broth, just for all the world as if he'd earned it. When they get childish, they get unreasonable like children. Many's the time I've said to him, 'Why arn't you under-

ground, father?' We ought to be allowed to put them there when their time's come, and they won't go in the course of nature."

The steward turned from him in disgust and pain, and rested his gaze on the old, worn, rugged form lying on its bed of sacking.

About the doorway, peeping and curious, the children were gathered.

"Is it all over?" said their mother with a whine.

"It is all over indeed!" said the steward gravely, and with a flash of loathing in his blue eyes. "You will learn what he suffered when you lie on your own death-bed. I came as soon as I heard of it. Why could you not even let me know?"

They tittered in concert: men, women, boys, and girls. What a fuss about old Nonno! But, of course, this young man was a foreigner, and that was as good as saying he was a fool. Did he not want dogs fed,

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and cows kept clean? Did he not say men should wash their bodies and women should not swaddle their children? Was he not a new-comer, an interloper, a meddler, a stranger from nobody knew where?

Alcide's wife, however, had the wit to see that they were on the wrong tack.

"Good sir," she said, with tears in her voice, "we have done what we could, but you know we are poor, poor, poor; and now there will be no end of money to find for the burial, and we ought to be allowed to scratch a hole and put him in the woods, but you know the powers that be won't let us, and we have to carry him all the way to San Vitale, and we must borrow a neighbour's mule, and when we get there pay all the church and graveyard dues, and sacristans and sextons—they live like carrion flies getting fat on corpses——"

"Hold your tongue, you idiot!"

said her husband. "For sure the Ministro here will help us through all these troubles. He knows how poor we are. Not a bit of bread sometimes all the twenty-four hours through."

"I will send here early in the forenoon, and will do all that is necessary," said the steward. "Let your women folk cleanse and clothe the body, and watch by it through the night. You may be poor, but poverty need not be brutality, and you—you would make the wolves of the steppes seem beside you like angels of mercy."

His words were unintelligible to his auditors ; but they understood that he was offended and disgusted with them. They did not care a jot for his opinion, but they cared much for his purse. Without even a glance at them, he made the sign of the cross reverently on the brow and breast of the corpse, and in silence went out of the garret ; took

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the bridle from the nail on the wall, led his horse out over the doorstep, and vaulted into the saddle.

"Not even a copper piece has he left behind him!" moaned the woman.

Alcide stood on the threshold, and watched the form of the horseman vanishing into the blackness under the trees. He made a gesture as of lifting an imaginary gun to his shoulder and pointing it. "Eh?" he said to his brother Lucio.

Lucio, who was of a slower and weaker temperament, scratched his head

"I don't say no," he answered; "but it's always a dangerous game to play at, 'Cide."

"Pooh!" said Alcide. "The woods are good friends; they never prate. But one can wait. Perhaps we shall get something out of him to-morrow."

"Anyhow, he is gone now," said Lucio, as the sound of the horse's

hoofs grew faint on the wet moss of the forest road.

The young steward rode through them this dark night very slowly, for the road was bad, and his horse, though well used to such work, felt each step carefully, and sometimes whinnied with fear as an owl flew past or a pole-cat rushed across the path.

But even in this cautious passage through the almost impenetrable gloom he nearly trampled on a woman who stood in his way and cried to him to stop. He checked his horse, just in time to avoid collision, and the animal's nostrils brushed the woman's head.

He could see nothing of her except the shine of two great eyes as he struck a match in front of her.

"It is I, Muriella!" she said quickly. "Is he dead, sir?"

"Yes ; your grandfather is dead," he answered gravely, "and he died alone and unaided as I would not let a sick steer die."

"Gone without the holy oil? Gone without shrive?—O Christ, help us!" she said in a voice of awe.

"He died as I would not let a sick steer die," repeated the rider.

"I had been to fetch the vicar of San Vitale," she added; "'twas the nearest; but he was away, and the sacristan said he would not be back for two days."

"Could you not have gone by preference for a doctor?"

"No; there is nobody who would pay, and, besides, one must go to Ronciglione, twenty-five miles away, and the doctor there would refuse, for he has nought to do with us. To be sure, there is an apothecary at San Vitale, but he would have to be paid, and who amongst us could pay him?"

"This is shocking! A whole commune without medical aid!"

"I am more sorry he is gone unshriven," she said with regret.

"But perhaps—up yonder—somebody will see to it, and say a good word for him. I did what I could, sir; those above must see to the rest."

The young man sighed: the nothingness, the blankness, the horror of death weighed on him. He saw that she had some vague, shapeless hope which solaced her; and he forbore to disturb it.

She put her hand on the saddle-bow and reached up nearer to him.

"Don't ride alone at night like this," she whispered. "Knives are sharp amongst us if guns be rusty."

"I am armed," he answered briefly.

He felt rather than saw that she gave an impatient gesture.

"What serves it to be armed?" she answered. "They know the lay of the lands and the ways of the woods better than you, and they will follow you some night when it

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is dark like this, and you will know nothing till you fall on your beast's neck, or back on his crupper, as it may be."

"I do my best by the people. If they please to pay me so, they must," he replied. "Good-night. You mean well. Thanks."

She drew back in silence, discouraged, to let the impatient horse and his rider go onward.

II.

THESE estates, known generally as Le Selve, were vast tracts of forest and pasture land lying along and beyond the Mons Cimminius, between the lakes of Bracciano and of Vico. They were of immeasurable antiquity, but had for more than a century been ill preserved, and much robbed and desecrated. Their timber was chiefly oak, ilex, and pine, with occasional groups of silver birch; their undergrowth was of arbutus, myrtle, bay, privet, and box, with much broom and heather. They covered many miles, and were the property of a Roman nobleman, and had within them oaks which might have seen

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the litters of Poppea and Faustina pass. In later times they had belonged to the Countess Matilda, and had been given by her to the Popes with the rest of her superb bequest. Here and there in them was a farm, a water-mill, a charcoal burner's hut, patches of semi-cultivation due to squatters; but these were very few and isolated. For the most part the woods were little altered since the days of the Cæsars; wholly unaltered since the days of the Farnese and the Borgia.

An old hunting - palace, which was now given up to the use of underlings, stood in the centre of the woods, the only large house in them, a gray stone building of the fifteenth century, which had once been a favourite retreat of the sporting cardinal from whom the Gandolfo had inherited this property. Around it were level grasslands, bordered by low granite

balustrades, with colossal stone hounds seated on the coping; and, immediately beyond, the great woods began, enclosing the grassy squares with walls of foliage which were pierced at intervals by narrow avenues or drives; in full view of the front terraces rose the peaks of the Sabine mountains; from the back were visible very far off Monte Amiata and the Cetona range.

It was a distance of five miles and more to this dwelling, and it was long past midnight when the young steward rode in at the gates. The stablemen and guards of the place ran to take his horse. But he followed the animal, and saw it safe in stall before he himself entered the house, and felt the warmth of the oak logs burning on an open hearth in the great vaulted hall of which he made his chief sitting-room.

"Sir, why will you be out so late?" said an old woman, who was

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the *Massajà* or housekeeper of the place, omnipotent over its women-kind and its stores. "The woods are not as safe as a city street, and even in the towns it's ill being out alone after midnight. Daggers are quickly whipped out; and pistols bark and bite both."

"My good Caterina," he answered wearily, "what have I done that anyone should want my life? Money, as they know, I never carry."

"So best," said the old woman. "As for what you've done, sir, you're put in power here, and you're a stranger. That's crime enough."

He did not answer, but stood a moment or two in silence in the warmth of the hearth.

"You are from the North," she added. "That's bad enough."

"North or South, what matter. Have we not a common humanity?"

Caterina shook her head.

"You mean well ; but you are from the North."

The argument seemed to her unanswerable. To him it seemed ridiculous ; but he saw that it was one of these ideas based on prejudice, ignorance, and superstition, which are infinitely more tenacious and hard to uproot than the strongest opinions founded on reason.

"Your woodlanders are great ruffians, I fear, Caterina," he said after a pause.

"They are not lambs, sir," said the old woman curtly.

"The old man was dead when I reached the place, and they had let him die all alone."

"They don't waste their time on sick folks, sir ; and old ones, when they have naught to leave, have no friends. Won't you come to table ? "

"Is it true that there is no doctor in the whole district ? "

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"I never heard of one, sir."

"What do the people do when they are ill?"

"Well, sir, they die or get well, as Heaven pleases. But there are wise women who know a good deal of herbs and magic, and there is a hermit who sells charms up by the Sasso Scritto, that bald peak which you see from the back door here. I bought a ring of him to keep my blood flowing straight; here it is; look; I have never ailed a minute since I wore it!"

'Are we in the last years of the nineteenth century?"

Caterina did not reply. She knew nothing about centuries, their numeration or civilization.

She drew his attention to the supper-table, which she had laden with good things, or what she thought were good. But he had no appetite. He drank a cup of coffee, and told her to go to bed. He said he felt no desire to sleep. His heart was

heavy with its own sorrows, and his mind was oppressed by a fear that he had undertaken a task which was beyond his strength. "You cannot wash a blackamoor white" says a homely proverb; and he began to perceive that those whom he desired to cleanse were very black indeed. He knew that all the acts which in moral codes are called thefts, arson, contraband, fraud, were merely sport in their eyes, and that even murder appeared to almost all of them a wholly natural and legitimate way of settling old scores and redressing uneven balances, whilst to cheat the revenue, to defraud the landlord, to weave a dramatic coil of lies, and to poach, purloin, and plunder as occasion served, seemed to them all the mere playful pastime of summer eve and winter dawn, simple as the frisking of young leverets on a sward.

He was a Russian of Esthonia,

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a noble, and an officer of the Imperial Guard ; he had been merely a man of pleasure, until he had been impressed and converted by Tolstoi and other humanitarians. Then the zeal of his reformation as shown in his acts and his words had led to condemnation by his military superiors ; he had been cashiered, arrested, and accused of Nihilism ; he had been found guilty of subversive doctrines and collectivist opinions ; the influence of his own powerful family, and others with which he was connected had been of no avail to save him ; he had been condemned to the mines of Siberia for life, and his estates confiscated by the court - martial before which he had been brought up for judgment ; he had escaped from the fortress in which he was confined before he was taken to the mines, and in disguise, and by the help of some of his late comrades, had got across the frontier

and across Germany. When, penniless and famished, he had chanced to meet in Brussels a friend of earlier years, Alfonso Gandolfo, that gay and generous prince could induce him to accept nothing, not even a dinner or a cigar, but at length offered him the stewardship of the estates of Le Selve, and succeeded with difficulty in persuading him that in this homely and obscure post he could do good, and more than earn his maintenance.

“We have been ill served,” said the Roman gentleman; “we have been the prey of a series of scoundrels; if you can put down the perpetual thefts, and protect the timber in some degree, my father and I shall be infinitely grateful.”

He was not deceived by the kindly courtesy of the terms in which the offer was made, but at last was induced to yield to it; he saw that in the seclusion of

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these great neglected forests he would be able to hide his own identity in safety from the world ; and he had been now eighteen months in the woodlands, regarded by the country people as a mere agent of their lords, and known only by his baptismal name of Cyrille, called by the forest-folks Cirillo.

Fortunately for himself, he had learned the language when a youth from a tutor, who had translated the "Divina Commedia" into German, and wide as is the gulf between the Italian of scholars and the dialects of the provinces, he had the facility of his nation in acquiring foreign tongues, and quickly adapted himself to the idiom of the people of the forest.

He was intensely unhappy ; he was separated from all he had known and loved from birth ; he had lost everything he had possessed and cherished, and brave men have killed themselves for sorrows less

than his ; but the active and open-air life saved him from falling into despondency or ill health, and he earnestly occupied himself with the condition of the peasants and the interest of the proprietors. He had received unlimited powers from the Gandolfo princes, in whose vast estates these woods in all their antiquity and extent were but a mere patch of verdure never visited. To a man, exiled, ruined, with a price set on his head in his own country, and with his heart aching ceaselessly for all he had left for ever, it was a welcome solitude, a blessed, a thrice-blessed sanctuary. Sometimes he thought he was already dead and in the Elysian fields, so profound was the silence, so sweet the air, so spiritual the green light under the trees.

When the woodlanders climbed the summits of the colossal pines to gather the ripe cones, they could see if they cared to look, and if the

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day were clear, a glistening ray of gold, a shining band of silver, and the one was the cross of St Peter's and the other was the Tyrhemian Sea. To them these said nothing; vaguely they knew that Rome was the throne of the Viceroy of God, whence sins were remitted and life eternal was given, but of the sea they had never heard, though the light of the Pharos of Palo was visible on clear nights from the higher ground of their forest. But to Cyrille, when he mounted into the high pine-tops or climbed the crumbling stair of an old watch-tower, to gaze from its roof over the vast verdure of these woods westward that speck of sunlit gold, that streak of sparkling light spoke, as they must ever speak so long as earth and sea shall last, to the scholar and the student.

Only one highway traversed Le Selve, one which ran crosswise, and met the old coaching road which

goes still, although scarcely ever used except by muleteers and peasantry, from Viterbo by Ronciglione, and Sutri to La Storta, and on to Rome itself; a road once the great artery of life between the Patrimonium Petri and the cities of Umbria, of Tuscany, and of Lombardy, a road once crowded by pilgrims of all nations; by the pomp of travelling cardinals, by the litter and lacqueys of regal women, by the strings of sumpter mules, the massed multitudes of armed horsemen, the straggling hordes of camp followers, the splendid retinue of Prince and Nuncio. Now, some dusty public vehicle, painfully drawn by blown and raw-boned horses, some string of charcoal-bearing asses, some long line of timber-waggon drawn by great white oxen, red-eyed, yoke-burdened, with heavy flanks and parching tongues, are all that the once great highway sees.

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But a past of more than two thousand years is touched at every step in these heather-covered lands, a past which makes the Borgia, the Farnese, the Medici, seem but as mere parvenues of a near hour. In the rocks are the sculptured tombs of a perished race; and the faithful soil holds the vanished nation's arts and letters, and keeps their secrets which no living man can read. When he reached those loftiest summits where the wild doves and their foes the falcons made their nests, the whole panorama of what had once been Etruria and Latium was outstretched beneath him, and in the deep green light of the thick-woven branches he could read his Horace, his Strabo, his Marcus Aurelius, while, from far down below, the humble music of the belled flocks rose faintly to his ear in a gentle rhythm which has never ceased there through thrice a thousand

years. And that resigned sadness which succeeds despair came to him in that sense of unceasing sorrow, of endless succession of creation and annihilation of which such a scene must ever speak to those who look upon it with the eyes which see, and with the ears which hear. He realised his own infinitesimal nothingness, the infinite beauty and the infinite ruthlessness of nature, and he seemed to hear, not the passing of the browsing flocks over the grass below, but the passage of the multitudes hurrying on their course from the womb to the grave, each runner passing the torch from his dying hand to the living hand of the runner who follows him in that fine figure which Lucretius has made immortal.

But in these Elysian Fields there were rude realities, and his conscience, which was sensitive, never allowed him to evade them. He was there, not to steep his

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soul in poppièd rest, but to serve the interests of his employers and of the lands and people committed to his charge.

Within the forest there were remains of rock-dwellings and of Etruscan tombs; he would willingly have consecrated his years to their exploration, and led such a life here as Ayvolto of Corneto and the Campanari of Toscanelli had led amidst the sepulchres of a vanished race.

He would willingly have spent all his time searching in the soil for relics such as were at times found by the peasantry, but his duties allowed him no such leisure. He took those duties to heart with the conscientious seriousness of temper which had changed him from an officer of the palace guard to a political reformer, and had exiled him from all which he held dear.

The Gandolfo princes would have been the first to smile at such

a view of a steward's duties ; but to Cyrille the obligation was a law of honour. They gave him shelter, food, and wage ; he laboured unremittingly in their service. If none were grateful to him he did not complain ; greater than he had served mankind, and only been beaten with the rods of the world's ingratitude in return.

There were small, very poor, holdings here and there, scattered many miles one from another on patches of more or less cultivated ground. And in earlier times some wanderer turned adrift by fire or sword, some criminal fleeing from pursuit, or some nomad tired of roaming had made a hut of boughs, and called the spot their own ; and in the peasantry living on and by these clearings, the newcomer found his greatest enemies and his greatest anxieties. Long years of license and centuries of occupation had made these sons of the soil look

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on it as their own ; indeed, in a manner, the Latin law confirmed their title, and plunder had become with them a right divine. All his natural sympathies were with the poor, and the creeds of his teacher held them excusable in all errors, and these people were very poor indeed, but their cynical dishonesty revolted him, and their habitual insubordination met and thwarted him at every turn. They cringed to him to his face, but cheated him and mocked at him behind his back. He was sensible of it, and it strained his patience sorely.

The ancestors of Alcide and Lucio had been squatters in these solitudes for centuries. They paid a nominal rental in kind and in labour, and did what they liked on their bit of clearing. This labour had been but seldom required, and their payment generally excused ; generation after generation had lived in this way, and in earlier times the

men of the family had gone with their lord to battle, and the blood which they had shed had been esteemed rent enough for their land.

But now that times had changed, and there was no war service except conscription, they had become averse to paying any rental at all, and looked not only on their holding as their own, but on the timber, the grass, the heather, the rushes, and all that was around them as their own. When they tilled their small croft, they worked for their own benefit, but grumbled even at doing that. They were brigands in blood and instinct. The first of their forefathers who had settled there had been a refugee from justice for the robbing and murder of a priest in Rome; and they were never at ease save when thieving.

They had no notion of time or of its reckonings; but they declared

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that their family was as old as the woods themselves, and there was nothing to disprove their assertions. They were, in reality, not more than squatters, as their forefathers had been ; but they thought themselves the lawful lords of the soil. They would cringe and beg, and even work when it suited them, but they had the old scornful Roman pride in their veins, and vowed vengeance on any who offended it. The woods might be the Gandolfo's or the Pope's for aught they cared ; they laid their hands on everything they wanted.

There were not more than a dozen such families scattered over the fifty miles of forest ; but every one of these was against the foreigner ; would have been equally against him whatever he might have done, if he had been St Michael's self, as Caterina and Muriella sometimes thought that he was. They had always been poor,

but they had enjoyed thieving, drinking, reiving, sinning as they chose. He wished to make them less poor, but he strove also to make them more honest. They did not want to learn thrift, or cleanliness, or common sense. They only wanted to be filthy, and lazy, and corrupt, and thievish, in the immemorial way transmitted from their fathers. They wanted no new-fangled virtues. Any wrong they did, such as kniving a neighbour or lifting a calf, was put up in a bundle, as they put up weeds to burn, and was thrust away till Easter, when the priest washed it clean, as once a year their women washed their shirts in running water. That was the use of priests and women.

To the people of this volcanic and historic soil the new-comer, Il Ministro as he was called, was accursed as 'the northerner': a northerner whether from Bologna or Milano, whether from Russia or

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Poland, made no difference to them ; they did not know one of those names from another ; everybody at the back of their mountains beyond the barrier of Monte Amiata sent the snow, and the bad winds, and meant the North to them. He was like a bad wind to them. The very good-will which he bore them was more offence than would have seemed to them his enmity, since the latter they would have understood ; the former seemed to them only a deep-laid duplicity to entrap them to their ruin.

There had been various agents of the Gandolfi there since that memorable day a hundred years before when the cavalry of Murat had encamped in Le Selve ; a day that was still talked of over the oak logs in winter evenings as freshly as though it had been last winter. They had been men who had cheated their lords and wrung blood out of a post, but just because they had

been thieves and hypocrites, they had winked at many evil deeds, and had never interfered with the ways and beliefs, the robberies and stabblings, the family feuds and drunken brawls of the country people. It had been their interest to shut their eyes to all which did not concern the fillings of their own leathern money-bags, and nod in mute condonation ; and they had done so.

One of them, indeed, had been shot dead as he stood at his bedroom window with the moonlight full upon him ; and another had been knived as he had ridden home from a fair ; but on the whole they had been let alone and not disliked. They had been men of the province, *dei nostri* ; and that fact covers a multitude of sins.

No one of these stewards would have gone to see the old peasant on his death-bed, and made a fuss about his being left alone, and have accompanied his corpse to its burial.

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They would have sent a barrel of good wine to the survivors to make merry with after the funeral, and would never have asked where the body was buried or what respect had been shown to it.

Moreover, they had been men of the people, who had known at most bookkeeping by double entry, and something of cattle and forestry; this northerner talked of trees and plants as though they were living creatures with wills of their own; pretended that the roots of an oak corresponded in size and shape with its branches, that its leaves were its lungs, and all sorts of similar trash; he was never drunk, he never swore, he kissed his horse on the forehead, he bathed in running streams, he never made love to their daughters, he wanted to open a school for the woodlanders' children, and he had heathenish books and devilish instruments in his rooms of which they caught appalling glimpses. His

employers had sent him a compass, a chronometer, an aneroid, and a telescope with some globes and atlases from Rome, and even his friend Caterina, who in a year and a half had grown to believe him a harmless and even lovable person, could not see these objects without horror, and she had begged to be allowed to bring over the vicar from San Vitale to exorcise them.

She was a stout, good-natured, handsome, old woman, who had been born on the Gandolfo lands, and had lived on them all her life ; a good cook in her own limited, coarse fashion, and a bustling, spirited directress of the lads and lasses about the house.

“ You fash yourself for nought, sir,” she said often to Cyrille. “ Our folks are as Nature made them : you will never alter them. They think their own ways best, and they see no harm in a knife or a musket-shot

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when there is any score to be wiped out. They will never listen to you, not if you're here fifty years."

"They will come to understand me in time," he said to himself; but there are some things which even time cannot touch, and amongst these things are many human hearts. In appealing to their indulgence or to their gratitude, or to their intelligence, he appealed to qualities which did not exist.

When he had taken his coffee he sat on, beside the fire, instead of going to bed, a bad habit as he knew; but he had been a *viveur* in the fashionable clubs of S. Petersburg, and used to turn night into day; he seldom did so now, for his days were laborious, and he kept labourer's hours usually. He looked into the wide hearth and on to the red-hot oak logs and the crimson ashes, and in them he saw faces dear to him, on which his eyes would probably never look again—

one face most often of all, fair, pale, proud, tender, with the gleam of diamonds in the hair and at the throat ; a woman who loved him and whom he loved—a woman who was not his. Where was she this night ? It was past midnight now in Russia as here in Latium. Was she, as he had so often seen her, the sought of all courtiers at some imperial ball ? Was she present at some ice fête on some frozen arm of the Neva, in the light of a million torches, with the waltz music of Strauss throbbing on her ear ?

Anyhow, everywhere, forever, he felt that she was dead to him.

III.

THE old man was buried next day, the steward lending the mules and the cart; Lucio alone accompanied the coffin, grumbling at the injustice of his brother in putting every disagreeable task upon his shoulders. Why trouble about a dead man more than about a dead fox? Why not tumble out the deal box into the nearest ditch?

At a turn in the road a horse crossed their path. The rider was Cyrille.

"I will come with you," he said, "and discharge the fees." He knew that if left to himself, Lucio, were he trusted with the money, would probably toss the coffin into the first

ravine which was deep enough to tell no tales.

"No need to fatigue yourself so, sir," said Lucio, greatly disconcerted. "If you be good enough to wish to pay the burying you can give me the money. There is no need for you to fag yourself coming to the town."

"I will go with you," said Cyrille, knowing that the money, if it left his hands, would never reach the graveyard.

Lucio cursed him silently for a suspicious, obstinate, niggardly, foreign brute. "Spies on us even when we are nought but a carcass," he thought, where he sat at the coffin head, cracking nuts to beguile the way. Did no one else pitch their dead into ditches? What matter was it to this white-faced stranger if the old worn-out body were tumbled amongst the weeds and toads at the bottom of a gully? And how did the stranger

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know that it had been in Lucio's mind to do away with it so, and to sell the cart and mules somewhere far away, and come back on foot, all tattered and torn, with a well-told tale of robbery and a bare escape with life?

"Damn him! he sees through the bones of one's head what one is thinking," said the man to himself. The scheme had been ingenious and feasible; it had been planned by Alcide; and now in addition to the disappointment of not carrying it out, Lucio had the dread of his elder's fury when he should return home, having done nothing better than to really bury the coffin, and return the mules to their stables.

Cyrille, who suspected nothing worse than a possible misuse of the church fees, had no idea of the schemes which his presence defeated as he rode on towards the confines of the wood where the high road passed which led to the dreary,

small, walled place, now scarce more than a village, although it had been a stronghold of the Popes in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

"Would the body not do just as well left to itself in the woods?" muttered Lucio, as he gave the wooden box a sullen kick.

"Yes," replied Cyrille; "and I should like my own body, when I die, to be laid down under a tree, and left there. But your law and your religion bid you bury your dead, and bury them as they command. You can only obey."

Lucio grumbled inaudibly. For the law he had contempt and hatred, but for religion a dull pagan awe; such as in old Etruscan and Latin days, under these same forest glades, rude men had felt for the terrors of the gods.

The little borgo of San Vitale, to which they were bound, stood aloft, looking to the east to Palestrina and Monte Albano. The soil

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immediately beneath was honey-combed by ancient sepulchres and volcanic fissures ; and from a small lake mephitic vapours rose ; the hill was barren of vegetation ; the walls looked like worm-eaten wood, its towers were in dusty ruin ; it resembled a seagull's nest, which, moth-eaten and cobweb-covered, crumbles away in a naturalist's closet.

Clouds hung about its hillsides, and the air was heavy and cold. The few people in its narrow street were ragged, miserable, lean. Their black eyes stared at the mule and its burden with apathy. Their stomachs were empty, their hearts were hard ; they were half dead themselves ; some famished sheep snatched at the grass growing between the stones ; a woman plucked a living pigeon for the priest's dinner ; thirsty dogs lapped foul waters in the gutter, the sacristan came out of an arched door in

a cloister : was he called for baptism or burial? The latter? Very well. He had put in three dead that morning. There was room for a fourth a-top of them. How long were the coffins left in the ditch? Oh, a year or so. Then the wood split ; he mixed the bones together and put them in a heap. A man in Rome came up and bought these heaps at intervals ; he believed they were ground, and used for making pastes, or paper, or bread ; he was not sure ; it was no business of his what they were turned to ; he would call the Priore who was acting in the absence of his Reverence.

Then he unlocked an iron gate, and showed a dreary enclosed square of rough brown turf, in which a few iron crosses, and hundreds of sticks nailed crosswise, were standing in many rows. A tethered kid was trying to browse, and hurting its tender mouth on the sere stalks.

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Across the ground ran two diagonal ditches always marked by freshly-piled lumps of earth ; these were the resting-places of those who were poorest, where all were poor.

The figure of a woman was standing there.

It was that of the dead man's granddaughter Muriella.

Muriella Stravolta was a niece of Alcide and Lucio by an older brother, deceased, who had served in the army, and lived afterwards at Viterbo. She lived with the family and worked with them, rather because it never occurred to her that she could go elsewhere than from any welcome she got from them, or any attachment on either side. She was twenty-two years old, with one of those faces which have the old Latin beauty, and one of those fine forms so common in a country where the females walk barefoot and carry their water vases

on their heads, and are erect and strong and supple as the young pines of the mountain side. She worked hard, she lived poorly, she seldom heard a kind word ; but her uncles and their wives respected her; she had a strong arm and an eye which could plunge its rays into a sinful soul and read the secrets thereof. She always carried a long slim knife in her stays, and she knew how to use it.

She wore a rough dark skirt and crimson bodice, and a white cloth folded on her head in the manner of the Agro Romano ; the clothes were poor and torn in places, and showed her skin, which was of a clear pale brown ; her brows were level and dark, her eyes black as a stormy night, and her mouth was red as any scarlet berry of the spindle-tree in October. She had wooers as many as a population scattered far and wide afforded; but no one of them ever had more from her than

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a curt salute or a brisk "begone." She knew what it was to bear children for poor men, whether in wedlock or outside it, and she was in no haste to eat "the sweet fruit with the bitter stone."

"How did you come here?" said Lucio angrily, at the sight of her, as he backed the coffin and cart into the burial-place.

"You would not bring me, so I walked across by the hill paths," she answered.

"Womenkind have no business at these rites," said Lucio; and the sexton added, with a leer:

"Bridals and baptisms are for handsome wenches, not burials."

She did not reply to either; but she took one end of the wooden box and obliged them to lift it not too roughly to the ground.

"You did well to come," said Cyrille to her, with sympathy.

She said nothing. She was not there for the sake of her dead

grandsire, but to prevent the scheme of thieving the mules which she had guessed had been planned between her uncles.

"Meddling, mischievous baggage!" muttered Lucio. What business had women to cross and mar men's work?

When the brief rites were over, and the deal box had been tumbled under clods of clay, she spoke to no one, but climbed into the cart, taking the reins of rope.

"Lie down on the straw and sleep," she said curtly to her uncle. He was cowed; he knew that his intentions had been read. He stretched himself grumbling in the bottom of the cart, and pulled his pipe out of his breeches pocket.

"You may ride on," said the girl to Cyrille. "The mules shall be at your place before moon-rise, and neither footsore nor wind-blown, I promise you."

Then the reason of her presence

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in the burial-ground occurred to him.

"She is a brave woman," he thought, "and, I fear, the only honest one of her brood."

He saluted her courteously, and rode down the steep street with its miserably sickly people staring after him, and flocking round his stirrup leathers with piteous outcries for alms.

As he turned in his saddle and looked back whilst his horse slackened pace to pass over a little bridge, the clouds had lifted.

Above in the distance was the crumbling indented outline of the little walled hamlet, brown and gray, solitary and drear, and midway on the slope below it was a dusky moving patch made on the white dust, a patch which was Muriella and the mules. Above head the sun was breaking through the clouds in pale faint gold.

He had been a man of the world, but in his Slav blood romance and superstition slumbered ; he liked to see in that breaking light an augury of hope ; yet what hope could there ever be for him more than for that old dead body which had been jammed down beneath the clay ?

His spirit was heavy as he rode home, and did not rise with the exhilarating speed of his young horse. The yawning ditch, the gabbled prayer, the battering spade, the loneliness, the decay, the sense of unenjoyed and unpitied lives coming to an end there in the clay, generation after generation, century after century, with no object, no hope, no mourner, went with him painfully. Were he to die that evening, such would be his own end. They would bring him there, and shovel him in, and go away, glad to be rid of him ; and the land of his birth, the land of his love, would

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not be with him, even by so much as a handful of its soil thrown in upon him.

"I grow nervous; that brave woman shames me," he thought.

IV.

AS the full moon rose over the eastern mountains that evening, coming from the unseen waves of the Adriatic Sea, the mule-cart was driven into the courtyard of the hunting-lodge as she had promised. She was alone in it; Lucio had slipped off when near the gates, and gone homewards by short cuts known to him across the woods. His heart was black against her with the rage of a wolf robbed of a fine meal off fawn or kid; he was thirsty to pour his chagrin into the yet blacker bosom of his elder brother.

“Stop here to-night, child,” said old Caterina, coming out into the courtyard to greet her. “’Tis late, and you must be tired.”

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The girl demurred and resisted, but the old woman, who had known her as a swaddled baby, would take no denial. Cyrille came out of the great doorway, the light of the moon shining on his face, which looked to her so strange, so fair, so angelic, like the St Michael above a side altar in the Cathedral at her birthplace of Viterbo.

She thought the stranger of another race, another humanity, to Lucio or herself. She had never seen a man so fair, so calm, so delicately pale, and yet so cool in courage as any tusked boar in the woods.

She had noticed him much oftener and more curiously than he had noticed her; and she knew, as he did not know, the hate against him which smouldered in the breasts of all the people scattered through the solitudes of Le Selve.

"Yes, rest here to-night," he said, "we should be churls to let you go. Take her within, good Caterina."

Though her muscles were as steel, and her limbs as untiring as those of a deer's, she was fatigued that night, and she did not care to sup off the black looks and bitter upbraidings of her uncles, who, to her, would make no secret of their disappointment and their rage.

The old woman took her to the kitchen, and warmed, and fed, and welcomed her.

"You are as strong as a man," said Caterina enviously, for her own strength had also once been great.

"Stronger than many men," said Muriella with pride. "They know it all through the Selve."

"Strength is a guardian angel," said the elder woman. "But a woman's strength is a devil in disguise sometimes; she trusts to

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it; and lo! — it snaps, and she falls.”

“That may well be,” said Muriella gravely.

As she bent down over the brazier its red reflection shone on the fine outline of her brow and cheek, on the thickness of her raven hair, on the dark line of her up-curling lashes.

“You are a morsel for a monarch,” thought Caterina, but she did not say it; it was known that the girl did not like such jokes.

Instead, she said :

“I am going to change the mattress in Ser Cirillo’s room. Come and give me a helping hand.”

Muriella went without demur.

When the lifting and changing of the mattress on the great mediæval bed with its gilded baldachino and crown was done, she stood and looked around her.

"What are these?" she said, pointing to the telescope upon its stand and the celestial globe.

"Uncanny things that bring no good to anyone" answered Caterina. "That big tube lets you get up to the moon quite close; you can hear the people in it talking."

"Saints above us!" said the girl, much astonished; "I always thought the moon was a lamp."

"So do all folks as keep their senses," said Caterina, with that contempt of ignorance for knowledge, which is of all scorn the most derisive.

The eyes of Muriella surveyed the chamber with awe. It was very large, with vast windows, a tessellated floor, faded frescoed walls, and the grand bed with hangings in purple satin, once a cardinal's. There were some oaken tables and dressers, and a few huge chairs with leathern seats,

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and from the centre of the ceiling hung a bronze Etruscan lamp found centuries earlier in the forest underground. On one of the tables stood an earthen jar filled with the autumn colchicum, and there were many books and many drawings. Bare and plain though the room was, it had that nobility which comes from ancient usage, and the indefinable grace in it which is given to their habitations by those whose pursuits are intellectual and whose tastes are artistic.

"It feels like a church," said Muriella to herself: she had always in her memory the churches of Viterbo, where she had gone with her mother, and above all of the Duomo of San Lorenzo there, where Guy de Montfort slew Henry of Cornwall before the high altar, and where an English Pope forced a German Emperor to hold his stirrup as vassal of the Holy See. This chamber, with its three

great windows facing the west, filled her with a dim pleasure and veneration as the altars and aisles of San Lorenzo had done.

But she looked for one thing which she did not see.

"There are no arms," she said to Caterina; "not even a hunting-knife."

"He has a revolver," said the old woman. "But you are right, my dear. There should be more weapons nigh at hand. The *guardiani* have all guns, it is true."

Muriella said nothing. She had little faith in the forest guards. Were they the stranger's friends or foes? Of one's own hand one is sure—but of any other?

"Tell your master to get more defence for himself," she said as she lingered on the threshold.

"He is not my master," said Caterina, huffed and on her dignity. "He is a mere servant of the

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Gandolfo, like me, like Fausto and Gian, and Falko, and Dreino, and all the rest."

"No; he rules those," said Muriella quickly. "He is in authority over them. Perhaps not over you, but over them certainly."

"And God and the Gandolfo are over us all," said Caterina testily. "Over him as well as the least of us. Come to supper, wench."

Supper was eaten in the wide long kitchen, black with smoke and age, with the sweet herbs and the dried pork hanging from the rafters, and a great fire burning in a hearth vast enough to hold a dozen men on its settles. There were more than a dozen men and women seated along the tables with the light from the brass *lucerne* shining on their swarthy faces. The males looked greedily and glowingly at Muriella, but they did not delay the great business of their hungry

jaws and thirsty throats to pay her compliments. Moreover, Caterina ruled them with a rod of iron, and tolerated no amorous follies in her presence. Bean soup, roast kid, fennel and salsify and macaroni were their fare, washed down by a rough, stinging red wine. Their strong and comely women ate and drank as copiously as the men: they had few words to waste, and their white teeth worked like a mill. Italians have not always as much as they could eat, but when they get the chance they can feed like Gargantua's self. Two Franciscan friars who were passing through the woods and slept at the fattoria as a matter of course, were as loudly munching and as thirstily drinking as the others, and conveying at short intervals remnants of meat and bread into their wallets, under pretext of feeding the dogs who lay under the table.

“Trust the holy men to take all

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they can lay their hands on," thought Caterina, noting their adroit manœuvres. Through as many centuries as the oaks without were old, monks of all orders had come and gone, and eaten, and drunk, and been feasted, and welcomed at those tables in Le Selve. The mendicant-friars were now few in number, and poor in worldly goods, but at all the Gandolfo's houses they were ever as honoured as they had been of old, except in the innermost heart of Caterina.

Cyrille supped later, alone, in a small stone chamber which opened out of his bedroom. His place at the steward's table was filled by the under-steward, Fausto.

Fausto was a Roman, with the head and face, the throat and shoulders, of a gladiator in the galleries of the Vatican; thickly-curling locks encircled his broad low brow, and rich blood mantled in his olive cheeks.

He and the Franciscans spoke in cordial amity where they sat together at his end of his table.

"You have a stranger here since we passed by this time two years," said one of the friars.

"We have," said Fausto, and his tone was sullen.

"A man from the North, a schismatic," said the friar.

"Of that I know naught," replied Fausto.

"A pagan, one may say," added the monk. "Why did your good lord place him here? 'Tis a sin against the Holy Ghost."

Fausto shrugged his shoulders; he was no theologian.

"Does he know aught of forestry?" asked the other Franciscan.

"Yes," said Fausto reluctantly. "But all new-fangled northern ways. We always used to cut wood when we wished, and fell timber when we wanted a sum of

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money. But under his rule there is to be none of that. Only one tree in eight, and never even so much as this save in November and December, and no pollarding or cropping, and no fuel-making, and even the furze and heather cut by rule, and rarely."

He snorted scornfully like an angry bull, and drank a draught of the rough red wine.

He had taken the extreme step of going to solicit audience at the palace of his employers in Rome, but had not been received by anyone higher than the house steward, who in answer to his grievances had declared that he could not place them before their lords, since he knew well that in regard to Le Selve all the new-comer did was well done—an unanswerable Italian formula.

"All the old feudal rights are swept away," Fausto continued. "Rights of pasturage, of dead

wood, of snaring, of shooting, of barking and burning, of grazing and broom cutting—all are done away with I tell you, holy men. 'Tis enough to make the folks of the soil rise and fire the forests. Maybe they will do it one day."

"To be sure, poor souls," said the friar with compassion, "and the saints will excuse them."

Who would now give a Franciscan, when he passed through the Selve, a plump quail, or a young hare, or a brace of coots shot on the pond?

"To be sure, indeed!" echoed Fausto; "whoever saw wild forest land kept as though it were a Madonna's garden? No goats must crop, no mules must browse, no guns go on the marshes, no nests be taken high or low, no bark be stripped, no undergrowth be cut, no gins be set, nor netting; the Lord grant me patience! The people look to me for help. They

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come to me weeping and groaning ; what can I say ? What did he do when I had covered a teal with my gun last June ? Struck the barrel up with his stick ; and the bird away over the reeds. ' It's close time,' said he. ' Close time, close time ! ' By the Lord ! was ever ' close time ' heard of in those woods ? Have we not shot when and where as we chose all the year round ? Eh ? Many's the head of game I have got shooting a sitting hare or nesting plover. ' Close time ! ' Great powers above us ! Who ever heard tell of the like since the hills were piled one a-top of another ? But so it is now, and no redress against it to be got in Rome. ' All that he does is well done '—no other answer but that. Damnation ! I am nothing here any more. I am no more than a sere twig, than a strangled mole. I go to Rome ; and what say they to me there ? ' All that

he does is well done.' They will not even hear or enquire, and even the wild boar hunting is stopped. He is a second St Francis. He talks with the pigs and the wolves!"

"Do not speak the name of a saint of our Church in the same breath with a vile schismatic outside her pale," said the elder Franciscan; and he was so greatly shocked that he drank out of the flask of wine nearest him instead of out of his glass tumbler, and only set it down when it was half empty.

Muriella, where she sat beside the Massaja, was too far off to hear much that they said, but a little reached her, and she saw the lowering brows and tempestuous gestures of Fausto. She spoke across the length of the table to him.

"Your pardon, Messir Fausto," she said in a clear, steady voice; "you forget to add one thing.

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For all the feudal rights taken up, there has been paid compensation ; it is but the abuse of them which has been checked and stopped."

Fausto looked over the lighted wicks of the brass lamps at the speaker. He was betrothed to the daughter of a wealthy vintner in Montefiacone, but that fact had not closed his eyes to the other fact that the niece of Alcide and Lucio had great and uncommon beauty.

He had often seen her, for her uncles were favourites with him ; men who understood that he was in his place for his own interests, not for those of Le Selve, or of the owners of Le Selve. " Between the wise a wink suffices," says an Italian proverb ; and that wink had been often exchanged betwixt him and Alcide and Lucio. The coldness with which she had always treated him, when any other young woman between the Apennines and

the Liris was but too proud of his notice, had attracted him all the more by its rarity and offence, for *il bel Faustone* was accustomed to easy conquests. He was disconcerted now by what she said to him ; for he knew that it was true. He was saved from reply by a great clamour which uprose from the throats of all the farm servants and others present ; for whenever yet since the world began would people of their kind admit that any compensation, however generous and just, could make amends for the loss of old and dear abuses enjoyed with impunity, and turned to profit unexamined ?

Such abuse is the very marrow of their bones, the supreme joy of their souls ; no bird which is brought has the flavour of the bird which is poached ; no oaken log which is given burns so boisterously and so warmly as the one which is hewn by stealth and stolen.

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In speaking as she did Muriella aroused against her all the wrath of her own class ; she seemed to them an apostate allied with the enemy. Time, temperament, inclination, habit, were all arrayed against her ; the dearest privilege of all who heard her was to pilfer and to plunder, a privilege confirmed by centuries of usage ; who was she, forest bred if not forest born, to take the part of one who suppressed the time-honoured thefts of foresters ?

L'uso fa legge in this country more than in all others.

Who was she to set herself up against that time-honoured axiom ?

The hubbub was so great, the roar of crossing voices, and the scream of angry denunciation, were so loud that Caterina rapped sharply on the table with her horn-handled carving knife.

"Silence, children ! Who dares

“speak here? Quiet! Quiet at once, or no wine will be drunk by anyone to-morrow.”

Under so dire a threat, which they knew would be inexorably carried out if they disobeyed her, the men and women held their peace, and hung their heads sheepishly. Even the mendicant friars were mute.

“Come, wenches,” said Caterina, and as she rose all the other women rose also and left the kitchen in her train, Muriella with them. Against the will of the Massaja there is no appeal in the household which she rules. When she had sent the servants to their several evening tasks, Caterina took the girl to her own room, and showed her a little closet out of it where she was to sleep.

“You are plunging your arm into a hornet’s nest,” she said, with not unkind severity. “The woodlanders will never suffer you to go

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preaching against them and their rights."

"What they call rights are not rights," said Muriella. "They are wicked, thievish, knavish ways. They should be grateful for all your gentleman does for them. He is merciful and just. They should rejoice."

Caterina gave a short gruff laugh like an owl's hoot.

"A clear cloudless night is a nice thing," she answered, "but when a man is going to tryst with a neighbour's wife, or waiting with his knife to avenge an old grudge, he likes a murky night better, doesn't he, my dear? Ways are crooked, and plunder has been easy got in Le Selve. No one of the woodlanders wants to be set straight. Each one likes to crawl on his belly and go crooked as he chooses. Your uncles as much as any."

"That I know," said Muriella.

"But to crawl on the belly is for snakes, not men."

"Fine words, my dear, but they'll cost you heavy," answered the old woman. "Look after yourself, child; you'll find that enough to do. I don't like Faustone's hot look at you. He is a lewd fellow, and stands pledged to wed with a wench in Montefiascone come next Easter."

Muriella smiled slightly. "Messir Faustone may look as he likes, and wed when he wishes. He will not trouble my peace, be sure."

"Best that nobody should," said Caterina. "You should leave those bad men you belong to, and marry," she added.

Muriella shook her head. "Not I."

"Why not?" said Caterina. "There are only two things for a woman to choose between—the nuptial bed or the convent cell; and you are not one for a convent life, my wench."

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"Nor yet one to be a man's beast of burden," said the girl. "It is a cow's life ; for ever yoked to the plough, though pregnant and in pain ; for ever toiling over the furrows, though with udders throbbing and aching in milk. Not for me ! Not for me ! Death sooner !"

"There are good men to be had," said Caterina, not very firmly nor with much conviction.

"Not in these woods," said Muriella ; "and even were one of our men good, what could he do ? His woman is his for his pleasure and her pain, like the cow in the yoke."

"'Tis nature," said Caterina.

"I do not say otherwise," replied Muriella, and she leant her arms on her knees and her cheeks on her hands, and looked into the fire. Nature was rude and rough, brutal and ugly, in its human shapes ; only beautiful in its trees, in its waters, in its clouds. She did not know

much, she could not read a line, she had never been out of the woods, but she could read human faces and human hearts, and she generally found what she read in them to be as foul as the forest swamps, where the newts and the adders lived, and the nightshade hung over the slime.

Caterina went on with her spinning by the light of the three-wicked brass lamps.

"If you won't marry, I do not see what can become of you," she said with some severity.

Muriella smiled. "I am a good worker; I can earn my day's wage any time anywhere. I would go away to-morrow, but I am loth to leave the woods. They are like father and mother, child and cradle, to me."

"That is rubbish," said the older woman roughly. "The woods are dumb, like the beasts they harbour."

Muriella did not reply. They were not dumb to her, nor were the

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beasts either, but she was shy in speech, and the sympathies which moved within her were rather instincts than conscious feelings. She was not often capable of unravelling and explaining them, and the good Caterina did not invite such confidences.

"You are a ripe cherry, and Fausto is a wasp," said Caterina darkly, clinging to her ideas.

"I am a cherry that stings like a nettle," answered the younger woman with her slow, faint smile.

"Don't trust to that," said the older woman. "Well, it is late; get you to bed."

In a few minutes' time both she and her guest were sound asleep in the dreamless slumber of healthy fatigue.

V.

WHEN the morning broke over the Umbrian Mountains on the far east, the girl was away on foot back to her uncle's house, before the sun had risen high enough to be seen over the black ridge of the easterly woods. Her uncles cast evil looks at her on her arrival, but, to her surprise, no one said anything in allusion to the incident of the previous day. They owed her a heavy grudge, but they did not fritter it out in words. Vengeance would keep in the Selve. It is a good wine ; the best of all wines, to their thinking.

"I should be wiser to leave them," she thought often in the day

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which followed. "I can get my bread anywhere."

But her heart clung to the woods as she had said ; they were her friends : all she had to love. She knew every big tree in them, as a priest knows each one of his flock. She loved their liberty, their solitude, their silence, their brown deep pools, their impenetrable brakes where none but the wild pig could push his way, their green twilight, dim even in noon-day, the profound stillness of their winter days and summer eves ; she clung to these with all her heart, though without full measure or consciousness of why she did so.

The hare with its large tender eyes, the bird with its flood of song, the meadow-sweet with its plume of snow, the birch with its bands of silver, the oak with its russet-brown trunk—these were all nearer to her than the family with which she lived. From the silence and

shadow of the woods she derived a pleasure that was inarticulate but keen, and when she saw the mules straining under a rain of blows, the cows lowing in vain for their ravished offspring, the troops of weary goats toiling through the dust of the highroad, the suffering creatures seemed nearer to her than the men who cut their throats, or stunned their brains with repeated blows.

To all those around her such victims were no more than bits of wood, and the torture of them was the chief pastime of young and old ; but she had been created with a different soul. It was dumb, like that of the cows and the goats, but it was alive.

To her own relatives she seemed a fool ; only they knew that she was not a fool, because they could not fool her ; and her brown, well-shaped hand had before now taken a cruel shepherd by the scruff of

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his neck and tossed him into a running stream, or on to a bed of nettles. For she was very strong, with that marvellous strength created by air and exertion alone in those whose food is but black bread and herbs.

The work she had to do was of the roughest. The only rest she knew was when she sat down to the *telaio*, the board at which she weaved the rude hempen linen in use in the family. But this did not trouble her; she was young and active, and it would have hurt her more to have her energies and strength pent up unused than to strain them to the utmost in the outdoor labours of the croft and wold. The idea of going elsewhere appalled her, not from any peril which might lie in such wanderings, but from the force of habit and affection which bound her to the soil. She knew that in any other place she would feel

like the homeless squirrel whom the forest fire has chased from its familiar nest in the old chestnut bole, and driven out to wander forlorn over charred moss and smouldering turf, knowing its homeward path no more.

A few days later Cyrille saw her as he went on one of his daily rides through the woods. He stopped his horse and spoke to her.

"I have not thanked you for what you did at San Vitale the other day," he said, as she straightened her back and looked up at him from her kneeling posture, where she was cutting dead canes. "But I am afraid it may have made ill-feeling between you and your uncles. Has it done so?"

"There is little love ever between us," she answered. "Their thoughts are not my thoughts, nor their ways mine."

"Would it not be better to leave them?"

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"No doubt."

"Shall I ask Caterina to find you work with us?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"It would not suit me."

She grew a little red as she answered. Messir Faustone had persecuted her with coarse courtship.

"You cannot be happy amongst people whose conduct is alien and offensive to you," he said.

She drew down some more canes thoughtfully, and cut them through, and cast them on the ground beside others already cut.

"Happy! what is that?" she said, with a genuine ignorance which had nothing cynical. "That is the way you talk. We do not."

Through Cyrille's mind there drifted the line of Goethe—"When to the passing day," etc.—and that other sentence of Théroigne de Mericourt—"Doth not the child

smile in its mother's face under Tiberius as under Trajan?"

"There are natural joys, surely, given even to the humblest in all times," he said, with a little hesitation.

The beautiful mouth of Muriella curled with a little scorn.

"Did you ever note the asses that come for the sand which is taken out of the pits?" she said curtly. "They are put to their work when they are foals. They never reach their full growth. Their eyes are always sore. Their coats are always full of dust. No one ever cleans them. Their hoofs are dry and split. Their bones are through their skin. They get nothing to eat but mouldy straw and dead leaves. They are beasts of burden, fed on blows. They have never a minute's peace. The women of the poor are like them. They bring forth in hunger and pain, and what they bring forth is born to their

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burdens. That is why I will never marry, if that be what you mean."

He was astonished at the reflection and observation conveyed in the reply. It was like a miracle to hear any one of these people speak with compassion of an animal, and with any comparison of animal to human destinies.

He was surprised also at the directness of the answer, for a direct answer is seldom given in these lands.

He pointed to a speck of gold shining far away in the west.

"Yonder, where you see that spark of light, lies Rome. There, more than one man who was born of a peasant mother has sat enthroned as a viceregent of God, and emperors and kings have kneeled to kiss his foot. What woman can say what she may bring forth? Who can tell what the fruit of her body may be?"

She looked where he pointed, but

she did not understand. Of Rome she had heard, but she had no notion of it, other than as a place whither the *vetturini* went as the end of their journeys.

The way is long and the gulf is deep which divides the cultured from the ignorant mind. Each speaks to the other in an unknown tongue.

He knew that she had not grasped the vague consolation offered in his words. Silence fell between them, only filled by the sound of her rusty sickle hacking at the dry canes.

"Why do you stay here?" she said suddenly. "Why? It is not your country?"

"It is not; no."

"Have you no friends?"

"Yes, many; but not here."

"You should go to them."

"Would that I could!"

"Why cannot you?"

He was silent. How could he

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make her understand his position? Still kneeling on the ground with her billhook hacking the canes, she looked up at him with sudden sympathy.

"You killed someone?" she said in a whisper.

That was the cause which made men fugitives here in Le Selve.

"No," said Cyrille; "I did worse—I tried to teach men, and they would not be taught. My rulers thought it a crime. They put me in prison. I escaped. I am here."

Muriella was silent, resting the billhook on the ground.

"You try to teach men here," she said after a while; "they will not put you in any prison, but they will put you in your grave. They are all against you. They are not worth teaching. You will not alter them if you try till your hair is white."

"I wish to do my duty to my employers and to their people."

"You are a just man. But they do not want your justice. They want to do as they have always done, and be as they have always been. The wild pigs like the swamp. They do not want to go with you to clean straw in a stable."

Cyrille was silent.

"I used to believe," he thought, "I have always believed, that the poor only needed to be shown the right road to gladly follow it; that they only wanted to be led to the water-side to willingly wash and be clean. But I begin to fear that I have deceived myself."

Aloud he said:

"Were I on my own property, I might allow it to be ruined if I chose, though to do so would be, not benevolence, but weakness. Here, however, I have no choice. I am but the servant of others. I must enforce what I know to be right."

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"They will kill you."

"That must be as it will.
Threatened men usually live long."

"Not always ; and not here."

Then she resumed her work, and the pallid rustling ribands of the canes fell beneath her rusty blade.

"And whoever slays you," she added as she worked, "will never be found. Everyone will make common cause with him. Everyone will be for him, risk all for him, hide him in their beds, swear falsely for him by the Madonna's self. He will be beloved of all, and pass safely by signs from house to house, from village to village, from province to province. The law will never get hold of his little finger. The hatred of the stranger is more binding than oaths."

"Then why do you not share it?"

"Why?"

She did not know why. She had

not asked herself. Certainly she ought to be on the side of her own people, and not his. Why was she not so?

"You are in the right," she said simply; "and you are alone against hundreds. I have never been at one with my father's people. My mother was a woman of Viterbo. I lived with her in Viterbo till she died. She had left my father because he was wicked and cruel. She was good; so good! She taught me to see that the ways they follow here are evil. They are bad men, as my father was. And they have no love for the woods. You have. And now good-day. They had best not see you here. They will think we plot some mischief against them."

She bound all the cut canes together in one bundle, heaved them upward on to her head, and when loaded went away along the banks of the stream, walking erect and

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swiftly, the great sheaf swaying as she moved.

So passed the women of Etruria and of Latium before her through these woods. The work of husbandry is the only work which does not change with time, but remains, at least in Italy, natural, noble, and beautiful in its attitudes and its simplicity.

He looked at her as he might have looked at some statue exhumed from the soil. She was as sexless as a statue to him ; he wore the ice armour of an absorbing and despairing passion, which left him neither sight nor sense for any more fugitive feelings.

But she had shown a comprehension of his position, of his motives, of his difficulties, which was welcome in the isolation wherein he lived, and made him grateful to her, as he would have been for the sympathy of some other man. He discerned the intelligence which shone through

the fog of her ignorance, and he appraised at its due value the courage which kept her in perpetual opposition to those with whom she lived.

Her warnings did not influence his conduct, but he knew that they were founded on a just estimate of those around him. They weighed, however, but little upon him, because his philosophy was fatalistic, and he had that apathetic indifference to danger which comes from extreme unhappiness in life. When you have lost all except actual existence, it seems to matter little if sheer existence be taken as well.

He had been now eighteen months in these woods, seeing no faces but those of peasants hostile to him, and exchanging no single word with anyone of cultured intelligence. Muriella was ignorant as any one of the sheep, who only knew their winter and summer tracks ; but she

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understood with her heart, if not with her mind, and he found relief in telling her a little of those "old forgotten far-off things," which seemed to him so many æons of time away, though they belonged in truth only to his own life of a year or two earlier. It did him good to call up that past, these scenes, all those who had been with him in his daily life; it relieved him of that dazed sense of unreality which came upon him as on men in the solitude of a condemned cell.

Once he spoke of the woman he loved: not by name, but as Surrey might have spoken of Geraldine, with bated breath and unuttered prayer; and having thus spoken once, he did so again, and yet again, tracing her portrait in words, pressing the dagger of regret into his heart as lovers love to do in every age. And Muriella listened, growing pale, hanging on his words, till in her rude fancy an image shaped

itself from his words clothed in star-light, crowned with the pale hellebore, fugitive, spiritual, unreachable. Imagination was dormant in her; it caught light at the flame of his higher intelligence. She could not see clearly by it, but she saw a ray before her feet—a soft faint green light like that of the glowworm in the woodland paths, the ray of awakening comprehension, with its companion pain.

She did not know why she thought of this unknown lady thus. Perhaps it was because, when he first spoke of her, the hellebore was in blossom all over the awakening woods.

It did not occur to him that he did a cruel thing in interesting thus in his fate a poor untutored maiden; he scarcely thought of her at all; he spoke to her because he read loyalty and sympathy in her gaze as in the eyes of a dog; and because he was weary of the long, dumb, friendless

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front in which his mind and memories were imprisoned.

"You will go back," she said to him one day when the grief which was in him broke down his courage and his resignation, and she saw great tears rise slowly to his eyes.

He gave a gesture of despair.

"Ah, never."

"Yes, you will go back."

"What should you know, poor child?"

"I know nothing," said Muriella.

"But I pray for you."

He bent his head.

"I thank you, dear."

She looked at him with a wistful, yearning look, which he did not interpret because his thoughts were elsewhere than with her.

"I will pray always," she said briefly. "I am sure you will go back to your own land one day."

"You say so to console me. Those whom I have offended do not pardon."

“ May it not be put in their hearts to relent ? ”

“ As soon will yonder oaks rise and walk.”

Yet, though his reason rejected it, her persistent faith entered into his heart against his reason, and was sweet to him with the sweetness of hope.

After all, save death, nothing was absolutely hopeless.

He was still young enough to see many changes in the world—wars, revolutions, dynasties, policies, might all alter the face of Europe, and with the larger national life, his own obscure individual fate. It was the wildest and vaguest dream, but it trembled on the edge of the unknown future, as far away in the west and the night, at times, a faint spark of light shone, which was the beacon above the sea at Palo; not a score of times in a year was that far-off speck visible, but to know that it was there lent a sense of

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safety and companionship even in the darkest murk of storm. So to him was precious that sense of hope in another soul; he could not share its belief, but it saved him from despair.

“You will go back to your own land,” said Muriella; and the sound of the promise was sweet to his ear, though spoken by a poor ignorant girl who did not even know where his own land lay.

VI.

IN her, as in most women of her nation, religious faith was very strong, but vague.

It was an intense force, blind and irrational, which had no more doubt of itself than she had that her feet were planted on the solid earth. But it was shapeless and dim as the lineaments of the Scythian Diana, which lay so long under the waters of the Lake of Nemi. The early years of her childhood had been happy, for her mother had been good, and Viterbo remained in her recollection transfigured in the golden light of a lost joy. It was to her a holy place: her mother lay there. Slowly there entered into her mind and matured in it the idea of going on pilgrimage to

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Viterbo, and there beseeching that the saints and archangels should grant the stranger his desire.

It was a generous, an unselfish, almost an heroic thought, and it grew apace with her, as a sweet herb grows in a good soil, and the very pain it gave her stung her into pursuance of it. She had never been beyond the limits of the Gandolfo Woods since she had been brought under their broad green shadows one burning July day in her tenth year; but she knew well where her birthplace lay, to the north-east after crossing the last boundary of Le Selve.

Pilgrims through many a century had come and gone in one continuous stream from that little walled city of the Popes to the greater Urbs on Tiber; but now the Popes go no more to Viterbo, and the sand chokes its fountains; and the course of life flows away from it, and leaves it like them dry

and silent. This she did not know. It was to her the city of her childhood ; the city of winged angels and clustering seraphim, and heavenly choirs and miracles and benedictions. She had no knowledge of its great past ; of its fine art, of its sacred memories ; but she loved it because there she had known a mother's love, there had made a mother's grave.

In her solitary musings, during her long hours of toil, the resolution matured with her. Viterbo seemed, in her recollection of the long journey from it, immeasurably far off, far as the very moon itself. But from shepherds and cattle-drivers she learned the way to take, out of the woods and northward, to join the great high-road.

She walked nine miles, over hills and across streams, to meet the public vehicle as it passed on its way to Ronciglione, and thence went to Viterbo itself. She had

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only a few coins in her pocket, for it was only when she sold a little piece of hempen cloth of her own making that she got a trifle. But she had some black bread and two onions in a handkerchief, and she was used to meagre food.

After the green shade of the forest, the cloud of dust upon the roads and the grey desolate streets seemed to her very dreary; the city she remembered with its dancing waters and its glancing spires seemed to have vanished. Was the Spirit of God here more truly than in the aisles of pine and ilex? It was twelve years since she had been in these stony places, and her bare feet, used to the moss and the turf, ached as they trod the granite of the streets. But the Duomo was there, the temple dedicated to St Laurence, where she had knelt when a little child at her mother's side, whilst the music of the Kyrie Eleison poured overhead, in sounds,

winged like birds, which floated to the roof and passed out heavenward.

The great church was silent as she pushed aside the leathern curtain of a side door. The day was almost done ; here and there on the pavement knelt a lonely figure ; a sacristan moved noiselessly, lighting the lamps in the nave. She went to a side chapel, which she remembered, whither her mother had always gone ; and she knelt there, a tired, dusty, unnoticeable woman, and she prayed with all the force of her spirit. It might be no good. There might come no answer. But she would have done what she could.

She prayed as women pray for their sick at Loretto and Lourdes.

There was a silver lamp above the altar ; it swayed slowly to and fro. She bowed her head down upon the stones, and covered her face with her hands.

“ Holy ones, take the only thing

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I have," she murmured. "I am poor and of no account, but hearken unto me. I give you all I have. Grant him his heart's desire."

And she loosened from her throat a little agate heart. It had been her mother's; it was hung round her neck by a plaited tress of gray hair. She laid it down under the silver lamp upon the altar; it was her only treasure. In all the world she had nothing else. It looked very small, very poor, very valueless, as it lay, dark and worn, in the light of the lamp. But she thought they would not despise it or reject it. They would know it was all she had.

In a little while the church was fully lighted; the service of vespers began. She got up from her knees and walked away down the side aisle, leaving the agate heart and the braid of her mother's hair behind her. Her throat ached with silent, hidden weeping.

She slept that night in a poor place in the town that she knew, and left the gates at daybreak in the public vehicle, packed close between other women and screeching fowls, and wailing babes, and crowded crates of ducklings, on her homeward way to the cross-road which led to Le Selve.

She felt as if her heart was of lead now that her amulet was no longer warm against the pulses of it. But she did not regret what she had done. In a few hours the walls and towers of Viterbo had faded from the distance, and she saw again the dark waters of the little lake of Vico, and the chestnuts and oak forests of the Ciminian slopes.

She left Ronciglione on foot, and on her homeward way met a horseman, who, passing her, stopped his horse.

"Have you thought of what I offered to you last week?" he asked.

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"No," replied Muriella.

"How long will it be before you do?"

"As long as the earth is old."

"I am a bad foe, Muriella."

"Perhaps you are a worse lover."

"I would give you a string of pearls and a box of clothes."

"Keep the pearls for your betrothed and the clothes for a beggar, and ride away to your *dama* at La Storta."

"Where have you been?"

"That is naught to you."

"You look jaded and worn."

"I am fresh enough to make your ears tingle if you molest me. Get you gone to your lawful allegiance."

Fausto scowled, and dug his heels into the flanks of his good grey horse. He was not used to be flouted or thwarted.

She looked at herself in the brown shallow water of the river's bed, clear as a mirror, and wondered

what Faustone saw that made him so hot in her pursuit. She did not see any good looks in herself; she only saw her sun-browned skin, her dark, rough hair, her strong column-like throat, her brown arms and hands, her bare feet wet with dew and green with moss; she seemed no more to herself than a rude bit of wood shaped into human likeness, such as they found sometimes in the Etruscan tumuli. Fausto might find her handsome, and rest his wicked hot eyes upon her; but she saw nothing in herself.

She reached her home, after a long and exhausting walk, and, since the under-steward had seen her, made no secret of her journey to Viterbo. They were all angry that she brought them nothing, but otherwise the matter had no interest for them.

She shut her hope up in her soul and waited. In the saints'

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good time the saints would set him free.

"You mope, girl. What is amiss?" said her uncles to her.

"Do I not do my quota of work?"

"Nay, we do not say you fail in that."

"Then what matter my looks or my ways to you?"

She would brook no interference. She knew that she was worth much more than her keep to them, and they knew it too; if the men had shirts to their backs, and the children had as much bread as they could eat, they owed it chiefly to her.

"If she likes to be the light-o'-love of that stranger 'tis no matter to us," said the women.

"She'd do better to be Fausto's," replied Alcide. "We'd get a pig out of him come winter."

They would have seen with a favourable eye her welcome of the

Roman's wooings ; he was a man after their own taste, who bought and sold, and trafficked and lied, and could fake a colt and outwit a dealer with the best of his time.

"She may take her *damo* where she likes best. But if she tell tales she will be sorry for it," said Alcide to himself, and set himself to watch her.

To do so was easy, for they knew where her day's work lay every morning when she went out to it ; it was nearly always the same according to season. Once or twice he saw her speak with Cyrille. But he saw nothing which looked to him like amorous intercourse. The more sure therefore was he that she played informer to the foreigner's command.

"We have reared a cuckoo," he said to his wife ; but the woman, wiser and shrewder, answered :

"We did not rear her. She came

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full grown or nearly so; and she is not of the temper that makes spies."

Alcide, however, remained of his own opinion, and Lucio shared it. If a man and a woman, both young in years, did not talk of love, what could they talk of when they were together if not of others? Once Lucio got near enough to hear what they said, and to see that there were some feet of shallow water between them as they spoke, Muriella cutting reeds, and the steward, dismounted, leaning against a tree.

"That is a grasshopper warbler," said the latter, as a small bird flew up from the pool. "Take care not to cut where they have built."

"I see the nest," she answered. "'Tis like a little basket, and the stalks run through it. There are many of these birds here."

"They must mean other than they say," thought the eaves-

dropper ; and he continued to listen, but all he heard was talk of birds and their haunts, and the like nonsense, until he saw the rider mount and move away.

The part of the wood where the pools and marshes were, lay lower and more level, spreading onward till it reached the Vico lake, and poured into it its many trickling streams and hidden springs. In the swamps wild hogs and buffaloes waded, grunted, bathed, and bellowed, and over many a square league the brown spikes of the bulrush and the purple plumes of the reeds reigned in undisturbed sovereignty. A raised causeway of piles and stones ran across it, of which the foundations were of date remote as the Antonines ; and once off that path such intimate knowledge as the woodlanders possessed was necessary before venturing amongst the network of *padule*. There was nothing on the surface

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of it to mark out the solid land from the bog.

"I wonder your Northman does not want us to pay for the reeds!" said Lucio, showing himself a little later over the as yet unblossomed bulrushes.

"No one need pay aught for aught," replied Muriella. "So long as they take only in season, and do not cut to waste, there is nothing grudged."

Lucio snorted with scorn.

"Whoever cut reeds by rule or asked leave to rake in dead wood? The marshes are free to us as to that bull-calf."

He pointed to a half-grown buffalo turning on its back in a shallow of sand and water.

"So you say," replied Muriella calmly. "The lords of the soil and the stream do not see it so."

"You unnatural wench! Do you go against your own folks and their rights?"

"What rights are denied you?"

"We have the right to take," said Lucio furiously. "Your upstart whiteface makes a show of charity in giving us what is our own."

"The land is no more our own than it is yon bull-calf's," said Muriella, glancing at the uncouth play of the creature in the shallow water.

"You insolent jade!" shouted Lucio. "I will duck your head foremost!"

"Try," said his niece, where she stood between the bundles of reeds; and she folded her hands on her bosom and waited, the edge of the sickle turned outwards.

Muttering many oaths, he let her be, and went away, shying a stone at the poor calf, which stumbled up on its uncertain legs and hobbled away, splashing awkwardly through the shallows to regain its herd. He was not as clever and resolute

a man as his brother ; he fretted and swore about matters which Alcide settled with a lead pellet or a stiletto blade.

"Could you not find some occupation for that poor girl Muriella ?" asked Cyrille of the Massaja some days later.

"Occupation there is plenty, sir," said Caterina curtly. "But you know her folks little if you think we can meddle with them and go scot free."

"But she is not their slave ?"

"No ; not as one may call a slave ; but they have housed and fed her ever since she was ten, and they have the first right to her. No one can gainsay that. If she were to come here, and have bed and board and wage, they would stick a knife in her and in me, most likely. They would hold she had disgraced them. Folks don't go out to service here as they do in the cities. And what would they do without her ? Who ploughs, who

sews, who washes, who keeps the soul in all their lazy, dirty carcasses if not this one poor wench?"

"I know; but it is unjust."

"Most things are, sir, in this world," replied Caterina; "she was brought there when she was too small to choose, and now she must stay where she was put, like the grain in furrow. There is only one thing that she might do——"

"What is that?"

"She might take the veil. If she did that they would not dare to say aught against it, for they would know they would burn in fire everlasting if they did."

"Why should she not marry?"

• "Nay, sir; she will not marry such as alone would marry her. Only a *ciociaro* would take her, and 'twould be but a change of masters."

"Poor girl!" said Cyrille, with regret. He knew what to marry a *ciociaro* implied.

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"You had better not think about her, sir," said Caterina, with significance. "Your thoughts can do her no good."

"They shall do her no harm, I promise you."

"Fine words! Fine words!" said Caterina, who, though she thought him a man above others, was doubtful of his regarding a good-looking maiden in any other manner than as the bee looks at the rose.

VII.

THE position of a steward in Italy, if he be an honest man, is necessarily a position of continual friction in relation to the tenantry, and above all to those who, as in so many instances, pay in kind and pay in labour. Their perpetual effort is to cheat, and his to frustrate their cheating, for even if he be himself a trickster to his lord, it is not to his interests that their tricks should succeed.

To Cyrille, with his political views, his poetic communism, and his genuine tenderness of temper, it was a daily torment to mark, track, and prevent the continual petty thefts and crooked intrigues of those forest-squatters. More

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than once he was on the point of writing to Adolfo Gandolfo, and begging him to tender his resignation to the old prince. But many reasons restrained him : in the first place, gratitude ; in the second, that natural reluctance of every high-spirited man to confess himself beaten ; besides this, there was always a feeling which had entered into him of affection for the trees and for the animals, and a great sense of repose in the dim green solitudes which closed in around his refuge. If he went away, in impatience and thanklessness, what could await him ? Only the stifling life of cities, the sordid struggle of intellect with want. Where again if he left Le Selve would he see the light of morning on the snows of Soracte ? Where again behold the evening's gold gleam on the line of the sea by Ostia ? Where smell the burgeoning blossoms of the lime ? Where stroke the velvet

antlers of the deer? Where watch the nightingales pluck the small white moths off the pale azure discs of the succory? Where see the day decline in pomp behind the hoary boughs of oaks which as saplings saw the armies of Theodoric and of Constantine pass beneath their sapling shadows; the spell of Rome held him and the sorcery of Nature; of that Nature which is eternally young, yet allied with the greatest ages of the earth.

The year did not pass without the warning of the women to him being verified. Once a bullet whistled past him as he rode, and cut off the oak leaves at his shoulder. But the forest growth hid the would-be assassin from his sight; and another night, when he rode over the wooden bridge often used by him in returning homeward, the planks gave way beneath his horse's tread, and the animal and he escaped by a miracle

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from a bad fall on to jagged rocks and into deep water ; and when he examined it by daylight it seemed to him that the timbers had been sawn nearly asunder, so as to give way under vibration. But of the guilty persons there was no trace. What affected him more was when his dog, a greyhound of large size and great beauty, sent to him by Gandolfo, was found dead one noonday stretched out on the terrace, with all the signs of death, by a poison which the woodlanders extracted from adders which they caught and robbed of their venom, treating it as they did also the poison of the night-shade, and the hemlock, and the corn-crowfoot, in a manner learned by oral recipes handed down from remote Etruscan times. It was only the eldest living son who received that teaching from the head of the family, and in turn passed it to his heir, with many another dark secret of subterranean

waters, and buried passages, and rock tombs and hollow ways in which a fugitive from justice might dwell safely many a year. Muriella had no doubt as to who had slain the greyhound ; for Alcide was so good-natured, so industrious, so quiet, by comparison with his ordinary habit, that she felt sure he had done some evil successfully. Cyrille offered rewards and made investigations as to the dog's death uselessly. Concerning his own danger he said nothing ; he sent workmen to mend the bridge, affecting to take for granted that the timber had been rotten and old. If any were disappointed by his escape, they kept their chagrin to themselves and bided their time.

Vengeance is like a good Falerian or Chianti wine ; it only mellows with keeping.

After the pleasure of trapping and shooting, in and out of season, the main and favourite diversion of the

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squatters of Le Selve was smuggling ; the smuggling of all kinds of game netted out of season, of ingeniously - hidden wines, carried across the woods from the Este districts to the very gates of Rome, or as far as Nepi and Corneto ; of charcoal burned by themselves from the stolen wood of the violated groves around them, and taken in sacks under the walls of villages and little towns ; even of the very pips of the pine-cones baked in their ovens they made traffic, and carried them away and sold them for what they could get ; they took everything across the forest by night, with their poor starved cows or buffaloes harnessed to the wagons ; and it was not only the small gains which were dear to them but the pleasure in the contraband - dealing, and the relish of cheating the *gabellotti* at the gates of the capital itself. More than one of them had stabbed a guard and taken to the hills, where

such a fugitive could no more be traced than if he were an adder under a pile of stones. The ground was honeycombed with subterranean places, in the past Etruscan sepulchres, now the storehouses of these men, their entrances known to them alone, and their retreat safe from discovery.

"Every man may be betrayed, for Christo was," said Alcide once ; "but an outlaw is almost always safe and welcome."

It was quite true. There is an universal feeling amongst the people of fraternal unison against the law and the fiscal agents ; and the little children will carry bread and wine to such a fugitive from justice and never speak, or tell where they have found him. Whatever feud there might be between the families in other matters, they are of one accord, of strict and mutual support concerning their enterprises in smuggling and in brigandage.

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"This contraband carrying is an organised conspiracy," said Cyrille to the under-steward, when he had become aware of the practice.

"No doubt," said Fausto, with a gesture of indifference.

"And you have never attempted to put it down?"

"No; before me nobody ever did. Why should I?"

"Do you think it right?"

Fausto shrugged his shoulders. "I do not say whether it is right or it is wrong. It has always been done. The people would not like it meddled with, be sure. They regard it as one of their rights."

"But it is a bad, dangerous, and dishonest life."

"They do not see it so. It pleases them."

"And you connive at it?"

"It hurts nobody," said Fausto sullenly. "There is no thief so big as the Revenue."

Cyrille said no more; but he re-

solved to make an example of the first convoy which he could surprise. He saw that Fausto, for some gain of his own, or out of personal fear, closed his eyes to the practice. He determined to lie in waiting himself to hear the wagon wheels passing over the road on the first moonless night after this conversation. He understood why he had so often heard afar off in the still hours after midnight the faint grinding of wheels on rutty paths, and the far-off voices of swearing men. He took up his stand where three woodland paths met, on the edge of the only road which led across the woods of the Gandolfo to Montefiascone northwards, and south-westwards to Rome. He had reason to believe that it was a frequent route with the forest thieves.

He was alone, for he trusted no one enough to ask their company. It was pitch dark; the moving of night birds and beasts was audible

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as they stirred in branch or brake ; a deep runlet of water fell down through the undergrowth, rippling and splashing. He had a seven-chambered revolver in his belt ; he hoped not to be forced to use it. It was extremely cold, as nights in February are even in the south ; but he had known what it was to pace up and down on guard on the terraces of Gatschina when snow was six feet deep around, and the cold of the Patrimony of St Peter had small terrors for him. He stood immovable, his back against the trunk of an ilex tree ; his repeating watch told him that five quarters had passed since he came there. He was not sure that the smugglers were out this night, though he had reason to believe so. It might well be that he had come there for nothing ; but he was resolved to wait until the dawn.

At last, in the darkness and stillness, he heard the distant sound of

cleft hoofs moving through muddy earth, and springless carts groaning as the rough wooden spokeless discs of the wheels alone can groan on their rusty axles. All the soldier in him was roused ; he had not felt so much alive since the day that he had passed the frontier of his country. They were distant perhaps half a mile. By one of these three paths fronting him they were forced to enter on the high-road ; there was no other. Nearer and nearer came the creaking of the carts, the crushing of the soil, the low voices of men : he waited until he could hear the heavy breathing of the cattle, then he flashed a lantern on them, and levelled his revolver.

“It is I — halt!” he said in a clear voice.

They instinctively pulled the buffaloes backward, and fell back themselves one against another. They thought he had guards with

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him. The cattle paused willingly, the gasping of their breath, the blowing of their nostrils, sounding painfully on the stillness.

"Stir not a step, or you are dead men," he said to them. "You are carrying contraband."

He was by no means certain what they had with them, but his venture sped home. They had crapes over their faces. They had charcoal and game in their carts. They huddled together in fear, and did not speak lest he should recognise their voices. There were three carts, yoked severally to four buffaloes and two cows; the men were but three. They had no firearms, only their knives. They eyed him evilly, but they were afraid to strike him. His revolver, they knew, would be quicker than their steel; and they thought that he had armed force behind him hidden in the brake. They muttered under their breath

dreadful curses against him, but they did not rebel.

"Take your carts to the Fattoria," he said. "Go on before me. If you stir out of the road a bullet will find you."

Sullenly but timidly they pulled their cattle across out of the high-road, and into the avenue which led to the house. He walked behind them, his revolver covering them, as they knew and felt in every nerve of their spines. Cattle move slowly on the best of roads, and this road was thick with half-frozen mud, and crossed by runlets of water, and the beasts splashed heavily through the slush on their leaden-footed way.

But at last the half-mile of distance was traversed, and the lamp burning before a shrine on the balustrade before the house shone across the sward like a beacon. To his infinite surprise, no one of the men had attempted any rebellion.

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He fired a shot in the air, and all the members of the household tumbled up from their slumbers and came out, as he had bade them do when they should hear the signal, with arms and torches. He caused the cattle to be stabled, the carts with their loads locked up in an out-house, and consigned the prisoners to one of the strong-rooms made for such use in earlier ages. When he saw their faces he recognised in one the peasant Alcide. He was amazed at the extreme ease of his own victory ; what to do with it was more perplexing.

"Take them bread and water, Caterina," he said to her.

"Not I, sir. Let the rogues fast."

"If you will not, I must."

She obeyed, with great reluctance.

"Think of yourself, sir," she said when she returned. "Get to rest."

"No, I shall remain up ; I do

not altogether trust our household. There is a great deal of tribal feeling in your woods."

"Is that why you went alone, sir?"

"Yes."

Caterina groaned aloud. "'Tis sheer madness. I wonder they did not knife you like a sheep. You trust too much to that little steel honeycomb of yours."

"One can only die once," said Cyrille, and thought: "I died when I left my love and my country."

He remained the rest of the night awake and armed; seated by the kitchen fire, where he could hear the slightest movement which might take place in any of the long stone passages and basement chambers.

There was no sound anywhere till the cocks crowed at dawn. An hour after sunrise he had the men whom he had captured brought before him. In one he recognised, as he expected to do, the peasant

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Alcide ; the other two were neighbours of his, young, unintelligent, ill-looking boors who had followed Alcide's lead.

The dark-browed, lean, unwashed man scowled at him as he had done in the death-chamber of the old Adamo ; his eyes were like jewels and scintillated dangerously. He had been disarmed when brought there, but his fingers fingered nervously at his hairy breast seeking the poignard which was always used to lie within his belt. Cyrille cross-questioned him minutely, but failed to get any confession out of him.

" You took me in the act," he said sullenly. " Make what you can of that."

In his own mind Alcide was certain that his niece had betrayed him ; but he would let no word escape him which could be construed into confession or facilitate condemnation.

The theft of the charcoal and game, and the intent to run them contraband, were evident, and he did not deny them; but he did not admit either. He left his accuser to collect evidence as he could.

There was enough of it to justify Cyrille in sending him and his companions to the nearest guardhouse, which was a dozen miles on the other side of the woods.

It would have been the wisest course to pursue, and Alcide would have had a year or more of prison; his companions, more excusable, as tempted by him, perhaps less.

But his present judge was a man who held the creeds of Tolstoi; who abhorred the eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth of modern legislation; who had infinite compassion for the poor and ignorant, and even for the most vicious. He took a course which he thought

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would be just both for his employers and to the thief.

“I could send you to take your trial,” he said in conclusion, “and your trial would undoubtedly end in your conviction. I perhaps shall do wrong if I spare you. But my employers leave me large discretion, and I shall exercise it in your favour. I confiscate the stolen charcoal ; it is the property of my masters ; and the game I shall send to the hospitals of Rome ; but I will restore to you your carts and cattle, and I will set you free. All I ask of you is to offend no more.”

Alcide's face did not change ; he shrugged his shoulders slightly ; the other two offenders fell on their knees and blessed the saints, and swore their willingness to lead a cleanly life.

“Of what are you thinking, Alcide ?” said Cyrille, looking at the dark savage, sunburnt face of Muriella's uncle, with its glittering

eyes and its deep lines of dirt and smoke.

"I was thinking that you have not learned much since you have come here!" replied the man in tones of rasping contempt.

"You mean that I am a fool to spare you?"

Alcide showed his white even teeth flashing in his swarthy face with a grin of satirical scorn. He did not answer in words.

"I fear that I am," said Cyrille. "But I have given you my word. I cannot withdraw it now. If any hear of this matter it will not be from me. Go. You are free. Your knife will be given back to you. Treat your cattle decently if you know how; and if I take you, when engaged in this work, a second time, I shall not spare you."

Alcide turned on his heel, and went out of the chamber without a word of gratitude.

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"The girl betrayed me to him," he thought. "Thank him? Not I! What does he here? Inter-loper, and spy, and meddler. He drew me before him last night as if I had been an ox. I will be quits with him before long."

"He dealt better with you than you deserve, you gallows-bird," said Caterina, as he went across the courtyard. Alcide showed his white even teeth again like a wolf's, and grinned in her face.

No one had betrayed him. Cyrille's own observations had alone furnished him with indices which he had followed up to proof. But the Italian always believes betrayal to be the cause of all disaster, public or private, and these men were convinced that they had been betrayed; their suspicions settled, naturally, on Muriella. "She was ever an unnatural, ill-feeling wench," said Alcide. "Always caring for birds and beasts and reptiles, and

frowning where we laughed. It is but of a piece with her to serve the stranger and rob us all."

But he did not let her see his suspicions since he had no confirmation of them; he, indeed, went out of his way to be civil and flatter her. "If you can make our poor girls like yourself we shall thank you," he said more than once. "'Tis those good ways your mother taught you; they were never in our wild blood."

Muriella weighed his compliments at their right worth, and distrusted all he said; but she did not know how passionately he hated her. He was a bad man, she knew, but after all he was her father's brother, and had given her a home, such as it was. It was miserable in many ways, and made more so than it need have been by filth and want of thrift; but it was a home; it saved her from that errant and lonely life which brings

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down on any woman so much contempt and derision, and in a rough way they estimated her use to them and feared to lose her.

VIII

THE winter passed, and no one of the threats against the steward had been fulfilled. The woods with earliest February were again filled with the fragrance of the hellebore, earliest and sweetest herald of the spring.

“They will do nothing now, the days are lengthening,” thought Muriella, as her nostrils breathed that pungent perfume of the pale green bells, which she associated in fancy with that lady of the north whom she vaguely and wistfully envied. But though she strove to persuade herself of this she felt no certainty.

Short days or long, dark nights or fine, are all one and the same

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to those who hate another, and the quietude and comparative industry of her relatives filled her with apprehension as to what evils such unwonted virtues might pertain.

Her uncles were certain she was a spy of the steward's, and said nothing before her which they would not have had repeated from the tree-tops. But the wife of Alcide was imprudent, and let dark innuendoes fall from her.

"White birds that come from the North do not always live to go back there," she said once, and once again said, "Le Selve is full of trees, but the trees can bear three fruits—fire, and steel, and lead."

Muriella knew that they could wait patiently for years when they meditated a revenge, but that they would strike in the end as unerringly as the gerfalcon struck the wood-pigeon.

Meantime the saints were long

in answering ; perhaps what she had done had been too insignificant, yet she could not think so ; they would be too generous to despise, too merciful to reject it.

“ Yes,” she repeated to herself again and again that winter-time ; “ I will pray always.”

Weeks and months went by, and she had no sign from heaven. Once she said to Cyrille :

“ Do they not call you home ? ”

“ No,” he answered in surprise ; “ what makes you think of things which can never be ? ”

“ You will go home,” she repeated.

Yet if her prayer were granted, she knew that he would go away from these woods for ever ; that his unknown love, of whom she thought as crowned with green hellebore and clothed with the stars, would stretch her arms out from the mists and take him.

Meantime the beautiful springtime

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came and went, with the song of nightingales in the laurel shadows, and the cuckoos calling from the pines, and the marvellous flora of the Agro Romano in blossom all through the woods.

The long hot summer succeeded, with water-lilies, white and gold, on all the pools. In these woods there is something of a tropical heat; their deep shade does not bring coolness, for it excludes air; it is delightful to the eyes, but to the lungs humid and oppressive. Oftentimes for weeks not a breath stirs the pendant foliage; when there is fever and ague on the plains around Rome, there is danger here in the forest in the sultry nights and on the stagnant waters. In the higher woods there is less danger, but down in the marshes where the mosquitoes hum in vast clouds, and the swamps dry up and crack, and the horse-flies swarm in myriads, and the toads

and the frogs die of drought, it were as much as life were worth to sleep there through a summer night. There was much sickness this year amongst the woodlanders, and Cyrille supplied as far as he could the place of medical aid. The remedies for such fevers were simple ; and the greatest obstacle he encountered was in the bodily filth of the people and their fear of fresh air. They, who in health worked all day long in the air in all weathers, falling sick huddled together in a foul corner, and shut their wooden windows close. But though he saved their lives, they hated him all the more. The report spread amongst them that he had poisoned the watersprings because he wanted the woods clear of the squatters ; and this preposterous tale found willing and credulous believers.

“ Truly,” he thought bitterly, “ I had better let them drop like mur-

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rained sheep. For what crime does one pay half as dear as for the madness of trying to serve one's fellow-men?"

But he continued to do what he could, by day and by night, in despite of their evil glances and their muttered curses, and of the fingers thrust out at him in exorcism.

Thus in the long course of breathless weeks the summer drew to an end, and every day the thirsty glades looked for rain, and the parched pools and dried-up waterways hungered for the first storm in vain.

It was towards the close of a hot day in September. The air was heavy and the sky dull. He had been out all day on his usual rounds, and came in as the sun set to his evening meal. He was thirsty and tired; he had eaten nothing all day. The colourless leaden heat made him think of summer

on his native plains, and even the distant horizons were veiled by the gray malarious vapours rising from the soil. The courtyard seemed to him unusually still as he passed through it. There was no one about, not even a stable-lad.

Only a man on a mule, with a horn slung at his shoulder, and some sacks on his saddle, was riding out of one of the gates he entered. He saw it was a letter-carrier from Ronciglione.

The post was a rare thing in these districts; scarcely anyone, in an area of a hundred miles square, could read, still less write. Once in half a year Caterina received news from a son who was a trader in Brazil, and another son who was a soldier in Eritrea, and Fausto had occasional correspondence concerning stallions or brood mares to be bought or sold, or bulls and rams to be had for the hiring, but these were very rarely;

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business was done on horseback and by word of mouth in these districts ; and to Cyrille himself no single message had ever come since he had first entered the shadows of Le Selve. Absolute silence had fallen between him and his own land and his own people ; he hoped that they believed him dead. The Gandolfo had promised him secrecy as to his existence and employment, and the most that he could hope for was that he might be allowed to remain in the poor substitute for resignation which is to be obtained from constant occupation and undisturbed work.

His mother had been in her grave some years. There was no one living, he thought bitterly, who loved him well enough to endeavour to learn his fate. His family, doubtless, and all those who had once formed his world, thought him dead, and better dead, in some nameless foreign grave.

Therefore his heart stood still with surprise and emotion as he returned this day from his usual rounds, and was met by Caterina, who cried to him :

“ The post-boy has been here, sir ; the post from Ronciglione ; dead beat he was, and glad enough of bit and sup ; he brought a letter for you ; 'tis on your table in your chamber.”

He ascended the staircase with beating pulse, and noticed not that the curious goodwill of Caterina brought her up after him and kept her at the doorway.

There was a large square envelope lying on the table, stamped with the postmarks of his native land, and sealed with a cypher which he knew.

He tore it open.

All it contained was a photograph of a woman's head and shoulders ; a likeness of the face which was always in his dreams by night and

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by day. Under the portrait was written :

" Je seraià Rome en hiver.

" Marie."

It was to him as though heaven had opened. His limbs shook as with palsy, his breath came in deep-drawn sobs ; he pressed the portrait to his lips and to his heart.

He was no more alone. He was no more without a future. He did not ask or care how she had found his refuge or learned his fate, how she had traced him, what she knew, what they could be or could not be to each other ; it was enough that she remembered ; that she was faithful ; that in a few months she would be near him there, where the golden rays of the cross sparkled in the soft azure of summer eves above Rome. It was an ecstasy so great, so unlooked for, so overwhelming, that it utterly unmanned

him ; he fell on his knees and wept.

Caterina, looking on from the entrance, closed the door softly, and went down the stairs.

The sultry day was ended ; the sun had set. Far to the west on the Campagna the fever mists were drifting in pale haze, like the wraiths of the multitudes of dead whose dust made up the soil. The Anio, shrunk to a runlet in its bed, was slow and almost stagnant. The distant Tiber was discernible by the thread of fog which hung over its course. In the woods themselves the heat was noiseless and dusky and oppressive ; the great ilex avenues looked black as the sacrificial groves of old. Yet never to him, not in April radiance or autumn glory, had the scene looked so fair. Evening closed in, an evening hot and heavy, without any moon or any breath of air, but he sat in a rapture of memory and of

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hope beside one of the large windows, of which the embrasure fronted the north. The light from his own oil lamp within shone on the marbles of the balustrade outside, and across a few yards of the rough grassland beyond it. Farther than that was all quite dark, for the heat-mists made the light of the stars dim. Now and then an owl flew by hooting; many had their dwelling in the roof; and scores of large bats rushed to and fro pursuing the invisible insect-life of the night.

At any other time it might have struck him that the house was unusually silent; that there was not the noise of women's chatter, or of men's laughter and altercation, such as usually rose up from court and stable and outhouse when the day was done. All was so still that the place might have been a monastery, with every cell closed, and every friar sleeping.

But at this moment of supreme happiness, happiness which seemed almost reunion, with that portrait in his hands, and under his eyes, and that vague, ineffable promise written for the future beneath it, he would have scarcely been sensible if the volcanic fires which slept under the tufa around had burst the soil and thundered through the woods.

He was happy. Once more he was happy, in despite of exile, of poverty, of attainder, of ruin.

Those fair eyes looked at him with the gaze he knew so well, and those fair lips said to him, "I am faithful."

IX.

HOW long he had sat there since he had entered the chamber he did not know ; he had had no consciousness of the old woman having entered the room with the lamp, and having told him that his dinner awaited him in the smaller room beyond.

It was with difficulty that he roused himself to a perception of her voice, when she stood again at his elbow, and called him thrice in a low, shrill, startled voice.

"Let me alone, my friend," he said to her ; "I am occupied—I do not need to dine."

"It is not that. Hearken!" said Caterina, and something in her tone awakened him to attention.

"Sir—sir—there is no one in the house."

He turned and looked at her.

"No one in the house? There must be some of the men—some of the women. Have they not supped?"

"That is it, sir," she answered. "Supper-hour is long past, and never yet did they fail to get together to fill their bellies. Save old Matteo, who is daft, and Dreina, who is lame, there is not a soul in the place. There must be some meaning in it, sir. Never did my folks dare to cross the threshold without leave."

"It is strange," said Cyrille, as he comprehended the singularity of her intelligence. "They do indeed obey you usually like children. Where can they all be gone?"

"The Lord knows, sir. But I am afraid——"

Her ruddy face was blanched.

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"Of what are you afraid?"

"That they have left the house because they know there will be an attack on it."

"Is it possible?"

"Possible enough. People who are warned and do not wish to take either side always go away like this. Matteo is daft, but even he knows something; he laughs, and draws his finger across his throat. Dreina is crying, but will not speak though I beat her. You had best close the windows, sir, and fasten up the doors."

He still scarcely gathered the full meaning of her words; his brain was still dizzy with the sweetness of sudden hope, the rush of reviving memories, and he had never been alive to the true dangers of the life around him, to its enmities, its risks, its possibilities. He meant so well by the people, that he could not consent to believe that they meant less well by him.

"You must be mistaken," he said to the old woman. "The household must be playing you some trick to affright you. Let us go and look over the outbuildings. The *guardiani* must at least be about the place."

He put the portrait he had received in his breast, and buttoned his coat over it; then he took his revolver from the table and put it in his chest-pocket.

"Do not go out of doors, sir," said Caterina, as she laid her hand on his arm. "I do not believe there is one of our men within call anywhere, and who knows what gang of thieves and ruffians may not be hid all round already? If you knew the things I have seen in my youth and my womanhood! I fear me you will meet your God to-night, for there is no hand but your own to defend you!"

This time he believed her; he saw that whether she deceived

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herself or not, she thought some deadly peril awaited himself.

"What will they do?" he asked, "and why should they seek to kill me?"

She answered almost sullenly :

"I have told you a score of times, and so has the girl Muriella, that you are hated because you are a stranger, a meddler, as folks think, a reformer as you call it. You would never believe us because we were women. Well, this night I fear you will find we said truth. But let us waste no time in talk. Let us fasten up the doors. They are strong ; they have stood a siege before now."

"I shall look a poor cowardly fool if the household return."

"They will not return, sir, till they see the house ablaze."

"Good heavens ! Do you *know* this?"

"I do not know it, for if I had heard tell of it, I should have

told you, and you could have got the carabineers or the soldiery here; but I know what an empty house like this means, when there are forty folks all gone out of it at the same time on the same errand, and I know that the woodlanders of Le Selve are no lambs."

He was silent a moment; then he said:

"I will sell my life dearly, Caterina. As for you, slip out while you can, and hide in the out-houses or the underwood till morning. You cannot alter my fate. Do not stay to share it."

"I am no poltroon, sir, and my years anyhow cannot be many. Come to work."

She led the way carrying the lamp, and held the light up whilst he put up the enormous bars and turned the gigantic keys of the iron-barred doors, and shut and bolted the shutters. There was no sound without. The imbecile Matteo and

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the lame woman Dreina he drove, as a precaution, into a little room off the kitchen, which had no communication with the outer court, and locked them in there. The woman would not speak.

He caused Caterina to light as many lamps as there were in the building, and placed them in various corridors and chambers ; he looked for the guns belonging to the men, but they were gone, and those of the under-steward likewise.

"Fausto must be in this matter," he said to Caterina.

"He is probably the mainspring of it, sir," she answered. "But no one will ever prove it on him. He went away yesterday eve to go to shoot in the *macchia* over by Ostia ; there is no close time there. You recollect he asked your leave to go and buy cattle ; but he told several of the men he was going shooting. If this plan succeed, he will come back and act innocence.

If it fail, he will take ship to one of the Americas. He has feathered his nest."

"He did ask leave—yes," replied Cyrille, still incredulous. "But after all, there may be nothing of what you think; your lads and lasses may only have taken holiday."

"They have taken holiday, sir, indeed," said Caterina grimly. She was angered against him for his incredulity. To her the conspiracy was clear as crystal.

He was still very doubtful of the truth of her suspicions, but he thought it well to take such measures for protection as he could. He made the basement as safe from attack as he could with the means at his disposal, and no man's strength to aid him, and closed all passages which led outward; there were some subterranean passages, of the existence even of which he had possessed no previous knowledge.

Caterina showed him an iron

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door in the side of a well. The door was just above the level of the water, which glimmered far down below; steps in the stonework descended to it.

"It goes out to the woods under the long avenue, and opens up under that great ilex which they call Pope Paul's," she said. "You might get away so if you would. The passage is low and narrow, but it has been kept clear. You know the woods well enough to find your way at daybreak to the guard-house."

"I could not hide and fly like that," answered Cyrille. "I am placed in charge here. I can only lay down my charge with my life."

Caterina nodded in approval, but sighed.

"If you will not fly, they will have you before the night is passed. 'Tis a conspiracy of the whole Selve folk."

She knew nothing, but she had

many memories, and she was a native of the woods.

“Did they not poison your dog?” she added.

When he had made all as secure as it was possible to make it (and he thought, except against explosives or petroleum, the doors would stand all night), he went up to an open loggia at the top of the building, with a dark lanthorn, and thence looked to all points of the compass. On a clear night he could see from the light at Palo on the west to the Sabine Hills and to Saracte on the east. Many a night in the full moonlight he had traced the profiles of the beautiful mountains lying like the silver waves of a phosphorescent sea. Now they were all hidden under a haze of heat and vapour; he could scarcely distinguish farther than the stone benches and balustrades immediately below, and the outlines of the nearest trees.

The stillness was intense. Leaning against one of the columns of the loggia, invisible to anyone who might be below, he waited and listened. But the sense of the possible peril near was less realised by him than the knowledge of the happiness which had come across steppe and mountain, and plain and forest, to bring him its blessing.

With all the tide of recovered hope coursing like warm wine through his veins, he could not believe that he was about to be besieged like a rat in his hole, hunted out like a fox from his earth. The man whom Princess Marie loved, whom she remembered, whom she smiled on in banishment, disgrace, and poverty, must wear an amulet too potent, he thought, to be done to death by a tribe of ingrate peasants. There could not be such devilish derision in fate, that at the very

moment when his barren life blossomed like the rose, it was to be cut down by a yelling rabble against whom he had no sin but to have served them in sickness and to his own peril.

He leaned against the marble pilaster, and let his thoughts drift away from the present hour to the past, which was so dear ; to the future, which was still dearer. Come what may, be what might, nothing save death itself could slay that ecstasy which sang like a bird in his breast.

The clock tolled at the stables more than once the passing hours, and the stillness was broken by no other sound. It was midnight ; he thought the old woman had been misled by her fears : the men and women would no doubt return at sunrise from revel at some distant town to which they had known it would be useless to ask the Massaja to grant leave of absence.

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Suddenly he heard a sound, distant, slight, such a sound as the passing of goats or sheep over grass produces; scarcely perceptible by day, but audible in the deep hush of night.

"That is the movement of men," thought Cyrille, with a sick sense of certainty. He listened a moment longer to make sure that it was not a breeze rising which stirred the foliage; then, with his impression confirmed, he left the loggia, and descended the stairway to where old Caterina sat in his chamber telling her beads.

"There are persons approaching," he said to her; "and they can come for no good."

"They come, thinking you are asleep, and that one of the doors has been left open for them. How many are there?"

"I cannot tell. But several."

Caterina shook her head.

"If help could come—but how

should any help come? We are cut off from all."

"Hark! they are crossing the grass. In a moment they will be at the great doors."

"They expect Dreina will open for them, the wretched baggage!"

For a moment or two there was silence, then a crossing of confused voices became audible through the heavy timber of the closed doors.

"Let them think me asleep," murmured Cyrille, and he covered the entrance with his revolver. He could not tell who were there without, nor in what numbers; their purpose it was easy to imagine. It was also probable that they were for the instant nonplussed finding no one there ready to admit them. But he knew that they would not long let this baffle them.

"Go and hide somewhere, good Caterina," he murmured to her.

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"It unnerves me to know you are here."

"Do not think of me, sir," said the stout old woman. "I am of no use, but I will be of no hindrance. It is strange to me that the girl Muriella did not hear of this and warn us. When did you see her last?"

"Three days ago, I think."

His voice was drowned in the sound of iron striking wood as the blow of hatchets fell on the oak of the great doors. But every inch of the wood was studded with great nails in front and plated with iron behind, and the axes made but little progress.

"Try the side doors," said a voice in which he recognised Alcide's. "The strumpet Dreina has played us false."

The feet of a score of men trampled on the marble of the terrace running round the buildings. But the side doors were armoured

in the same way, and had been all bolted and barred. The assailants realised that they would not enter by those means; they began to swear savagely amongst each other.

They had not crossed the turf as yet.

"Poor Caterina!" said Cyrille; "would to heaven you were in safety."

"It is not me whom they come after. Forgive me, sir; but is there much money in the strong-box?"

"Happily not. I sent an-express with the proceeds of three months' sales to Rome last week."

"That will make them mad."

"If they get in. I hope to keep them out. I shall not open to them—of that you may be sure."

She was a stout-hearted old woman; she laughed a little grimly.

In the centre of the great doors, as in most old Italian entrances, there was a small barred square panel, the width of a man's hand

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which could be slid back, leaving the grating open, and thus a parley could be effected without danger.

Cyrille drew back the panel, and standing on one side of the grating, where none could see or touch him, said in a clear voice :

“ Why come you here armed ? ”

“ Open, and you will know,” answered the voice of Alcide, and they cursed him.

“ I do not open to threats. Say your errand, or depart.”

They cursed him again.

“ We shall have your blood,” said their spokesman. “ We come for that. We shall not be balked. We will burn you out like a live hog smoked from his lair.”

Cyrille closed the panel.

The group without roared with fury like wild boars, and threw themselves with all their weight against the doors.

“ You could have shot him through the grating,” said Caterina,

with her face gray and stern.
"Why did you not? It was Alcide who spoke."

"I know it was," replied Cyrille.

"Why did you not shoot him?"

He was silent. He could not have made her understand the reluctance to shed blood which had held his hand.

The hideous uproars of a ravenous pack was now let loose upon the stillness of the summer midnight. They fired at the doors. The shots recoiled harmlessly. They were all armed merely in the rude manner of the woods. They had expected to be admitted from within, and the disappointment baffled and drove them mad.

"Burn him out!" cried their ringleader. "There is brushwood in the sheds."

By the sound of the trampling feet and lessening shouts he could tell that they were gone where the firewood used by the household

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was stored in sheds beside the stackyard and stables.

"They will try to burn us out," said Cyrille. "But the house is like a rock."

The old woman shrugged her shoulders.

"You could have shot the worst of them and you did not. He will roast you, as he says, like a spitted hog."

"I cannot kill a man in cold blood," he replied, and he pressed the portrait in his breast closer to him.

But he knew that they would doubtless do what they threatened.

The solid house would resist long, but it could not resist all night. If they brought wood enough and fired it, sooner or later those within would perforce fall a prey to the smoke and the flames.

Rather than perish so, he thought he would open and go out, and fall fighting. But to do so would

be to expose the whole place to certain pillage; and he was there as the representative and trustee of the owners.

In a few minutes there was no doubt as to the intentions of the marauders. They returned dragging with them quantities of brushwood and faggots, and by the sound he could tell that they were piling them up before the principal entrance; the voice of Alcide was loudest in command and objurcation.

"Fire you through the peep-hole, sir," said Caterina. She was gray with horror, but she did not cry out, or give any sign of cowardice.

"Not yet," said Cyrille. "These wretched people were confided to my care. If I have missed the way to their souls it is my fault."

Caterina gave a snort of scorn.

"They will not miss the way to your vitals, be sure! Much

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good will your fine thoughts do you when the scoundrels shall haul you out through the smoke, and hack you to pieces as they would hack a wild boar's limbs off his trunk."

Despite his courage and composure a shudder ran through him at the horrible words. But he did not open the panel and fire.

The men without were mad with rage because they had not found the house opened to them as arranged with the absent household.

They had planned an easy entrance, unmolested pillage, and the slaughter of the foreigner in his bed. They could not tell why they found him up and armed; and all the entrances of the house closed.

"'Tis that traitress Muriella," muttered Lucio; "she warned him, be sure," and as he spoke the other

men screamed in chorus with rage and hate. Let them find her! let them only find her! She should rue the day that her mother, the cursed woman of Viterbo, bore her!

They heaped the dry heather and pine branches up in a great pile before the doorway; they lighted matches and resinous cones, and tried to set fire to the pile. They had not brought petroleum, because of its name and use they were all ignorant. The wood failed to catch alight; the air was heavy, and there was no wind to stir a flame.

Cyrille debated whether it would not be best for the place and for the woman to give himself up to the will of the assailants, on condition that she and it should be spared. But he knew that he could not trust them to fulfil any conditions, and the soldier and the noble in him loathed the thought of surrender to this rabble, and at last

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he fired through one of the inch-wide squares of the grating. His shot broke the wrist of the man lighting the heather.

They all for a moment fell back demoralised; Alcide was safe out of reach, for he had expected shots from within, and had given his comrades the posts of danger.

"I would willingly spare you," said Cyrille, and his voice came clearly to them through the little aperture. "But you shall not fire the house whilst I live; I will break the bone of every man's arm used to set light to this wood."

There was a brief pause. They were cunning, vindictive, merciless, but they were not brave, and they could not be certain that he was alone. They drew back from the doorway, and took counsel amongst themselves. No one of them cared to be the second to have his wrist snapped in two; the first man who had met this fate was howling like a wounded

wolf, calling curses down on the head of Alcide. It was one thing to enter a defenceless and open house, and pillage all it contained, and kill a stranger in his sleep, and another to force entrance under the deadly fire of a revolver whose owner was masked and protected by iron-plated doors.

They had unlit torches with them, brought to light their way about the cellars and store-rooms when they should enter the house. Alcide lighted one, and standing where Cyrille could not see him, hurled its blazing mass on to the piled brushwood, and three other men did the same. But the torches fell short and dropped on the marble pavement before the door; as they flared there harmlessly their red glare glowed on the black figures of the woodlanders, which looked like the forms of demons as they danced and yelled with rage and thirst for blood, hidden by the dark-

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ness of the night, save where the fitful glimmer of the torches touched them.

Owing to the narrowness of the slit through which he fired, Cyrille could only aim at those immediately before the door or on the grass in front of him.

The peasants could, without going far, keep out of range, and from their station beyond the balustrade they flung two other torches ; these fell full on the piled heather, which caught alight, and sent a rolling, stifling cloud of smoke up through the grating. As they saw the success of their effort they lost caution, they shouted with rapture, and crowded nearer to enjoy the sport ; the fire ran from heather to bramble and branch ; the cones caught alight with jets of flame ; the dry fagots cracked and flared, the volumes of smoke rolled up to the sculptured arms and crown about the doorways.

"Their blood be on their own heads," said Cyrille, and he fired—once, twice, thrice. Each time a man fell. But Alcide still kept out of range. The fire was fierce, and its red waves licked hungrily the old oak and iron which opposed their entrance.

Resistance could be but a question of time.

"If I could believe they would keep faith with me, I would let them torture me to death, to save the house and the woman. But they do not know what faith means. Were I once dead, they would sack the place from loggia to cellar, and get drunk on wine and blood."

Suddenly there came to his ears a sound of galloping horses. The sound came from the long avenue in front of the house to the north. The men did not heed it; they were leaping and shouting and bellowing with triumph as the

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fire waxed higher and fiercer, and the smoke ran up amongst the bronze scroll-work of the balconies above.

He could now see nothing, for the burning wood hid all save itself, but he could hear, and the gallop of the horses grew nearer, and there blent with it the jingling of chains and of scabbards, and a shrill yell of terror rose from the grassland beyond the balustrade.

"The saints be praised!" cried Caterina, and she fell on her knees and burst into tears. "'Tis the carabineers of Ronciglione!"

Cyrille went to a side door which the fire had not reached, unfastened its bolts and bars, and went out on to the grass.

The gendarmes had slid from their saddles, had surrounded and seized the woodlanders, who made a fierce but short resistance. Against a horse from which she had dismounted there leaned a woman—

pale, dishevelled, exhausted, staring with dilated eyes at the burning pile. She was drenched with sweat; discoloured with heat and dust; her mouth was wide open with parching thirst; her bare feet were bleeding.

It was Muriella.

Great tears were falling down her cheeks, for she had delivered her own kinsmen over to justice, and she was ashamed of the guilt of her father's people.

"You brought the guards?" cried Cyrille, as he recognised her.

"I overheard—this afternoon—late," she said, her breath deep drawn and laboured, like a worn-out steer's; "it would have done no good to come here, and I knew the men at the picquet were absent. I ran to Ronciglione in four hours for the soldiery. There was no other way. I could trust no one."

Alcide was standing, pinioned by a gendarme, his gun having

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been taken from him; his eyes were red with a wicked, furious flame. There was little light, except such as was shed by the glare of the burning wood; but that was enough to enable him to see who it was who had been his undoing.

With a sudden movement, lithe and quick and unexpected as a snake's, he twisted himself from the hold of the carabineer who was about to manacle him, and with one leap like a deer's he sprang to the side of his niece.

"Traitor!" he hissed in her ear, as he snatched a knife hidden in his waistbelt, and stabbed her full in the breast.

They seized him instantly again, but he had aimed too well not to have slain.

"It does not matter," she said, as she pressed the haft of the knife to her bosom. "I was in time—it was that which mattered."

The blood from her pierced lungs choked her.

"You will go home," she murmured feebly. "The saints did hear!"

A moment later she was dead.

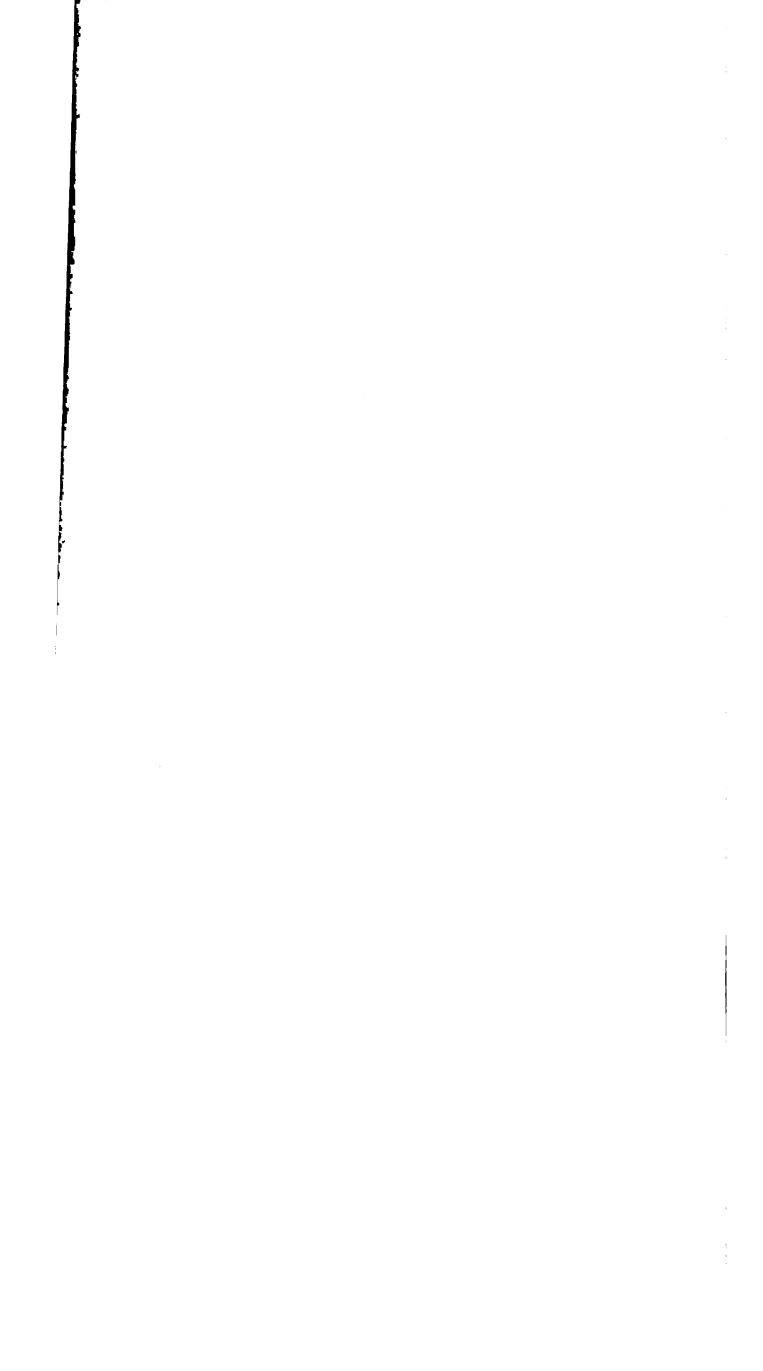
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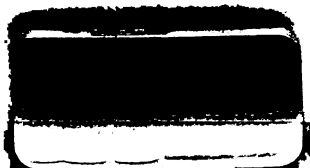
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